Annie Shirley

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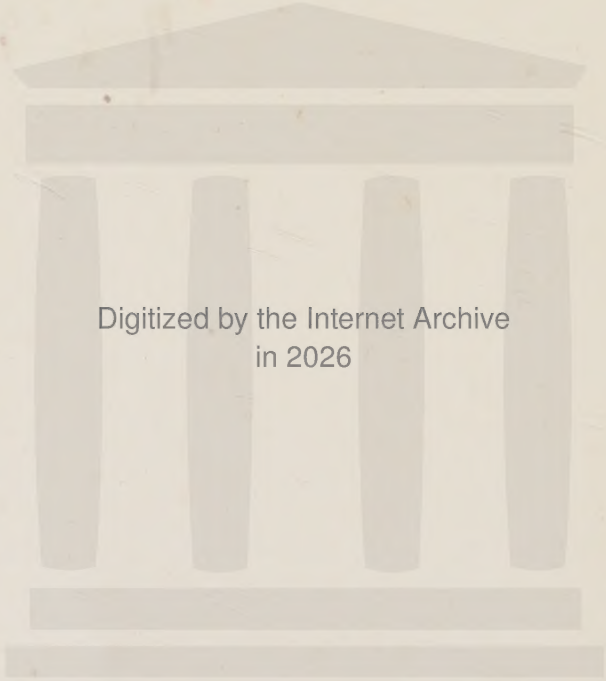

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THE TWINS OF SUFFERING CREEK

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HEART OF UNAGA
THE LAW OF THE GUN
THE TRIUMPH OF JOHN KARS
THE PURCHASE PRICE
THE MEN WHO WROUGHT
THE SON OF HIS FATHER
THE LAW-BREAKERS
THE WAY OF THE STRONG
THE GOLDEN WOMAN
THE TWINS OF SUFFERING CREEK
THE ONE WAY TRAIL
THE TRAIL OF THE AXE
THE SHERIFF OF DYKE HOLE
THE COMPACT
THE WATCHERS OF THE PLAINS
THE NIGHT-RIDERS
THE BROODING WILD
THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH
THE DEVIL'S KEG

OF ALL BOOKSELLERS

THE TWINS OF SUFFERING CREEK

BY

RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF
THE BOOKS ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE

LONDON
CHAPMAN AND HALL, LTD.

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TO

MY TWO LITTLE CHUMS

CHRIS AND RIDGE,

THIS BOOK

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

January 1912

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THE TWINS OF SUFFERING CREEK

CHAPTER I

POTTER'S CLAY

SCIPIO moved about the room uncertainly. It was characteristic of him. Nature had given him an expression that suggested bewilderment, and, somehow, this expression had got into his movements.

He was swabbing the floor with a rag mop; a voluntary task, undertaken to relieve his wife, who was lounging over the glowing cookstove, reading a cheap story book. Once or twice he paused in his labours, and his mild, questioning blue eyes sought the woman's intent face. His stubby, work-soiled fingers would rake their way through his straw-coloured hair, which grew sparsely and defiantly, standing out at every possible unnatural angle, and the mop would again flap into the muddy water, and continue its process of smearing the rough boarded floor.

Now and again the sound of children's voices floated in through the open doorway, and at each shrill piping the man's pale eyes lit into a smile of parental tenderness. But his work went on steadily, for such was the deliberateness of his purpose.

The room was small, and already three-quarters of it had been satisfactorily smeared, and the dirt spread to the necessary consistency. Now he was nearing the cookstove where the woman sat.

"I'd hate to worry you any, Jess," he said, in a gentle, apologetic voice, "but I'm right up to this patch. If you'd

kind of lift your feet, an' tuck your skirts around you some, guess you could go right on reading your fiction."

The woman looked up with a peevish frown. Then something like a pitying smile warmed her expression. She was a handsome creature, of a large, somewhat bold type, with a passionate glow of strong youth and health in every feature of her well-shaped face. She was taller than her diminutive husband, and, in every detail of expression, his antithesis. She wore a dress with some pretensions to display, and suggesting a considerable personal vanity. But it was of the tawdry order that was unconvincing, and lacked both refinement and tidiness.

Scipio followed up his words with a glance of smiling amiability.

"I'm real sorry——" he began again.

But she cut him short.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed; and, thrusting her slippered feet upon the stove, tucked her skirts about her. Then, utterly ignoring him, she buried herself once more in her book.

The mop flapped about her chair legs, the water splashed the stove. Scipio was hurrying, and consequently floundering. It was his endeavour not to disturb his wife more than was necessary.

Finally he wrung out his mop and stood it outside the door in the sun. He emptied his bucket upon the few anæmic cabbages which grew in an untidy patch at the side of the hut, and returned once more to the room.

He glanced round it with feeble appreciation. It was a hopeless sort of place, yet he could not detect its shortcomings. The rough, log-built walls, smeared with a mud plaster, were quite unadorned. There was one solitary opening for a window, and in the centre of the room was a roughly manufactured table, laden with the remains of several repasts. Breakfast was the latest, and the smell of coffee and fried pork still hung about the room. There were two Windsor chairs, one of which his wife was occupying, and a ramshackle food cupboard. Then there were the cookstove and a fuel box, and two or three iron pots hanging about the walls.

Out of this opened a bedroom, and the rough bedstead, with its tumbled blankets, was in full view where Scipio stood. Although the morning was well advanced the bed was still unmade. Poor as the place was, it might, in the hands of a busy housewife, have presented a very different appearance. But Jessie was not a good housewife. She hated the care of her little home. She was not a bad woman, but she had no sympathy with the harshnesses of life. She yearned for the amplitude to which she had been brought up, and detested bitterly the pass to which her husband's incapacity had brought her.

When she had married Scipio he had money—money that had been left to him for the purpose of embarking in business, a purpose he had faithfully carried out. But his knowledge of business was limited to the signing of cheques in favour of any one who wanted one, and, as a consequence, by the time their twins were three years old he had received an intimation from the bank that he must forthwith put them in credit for the last cheque he had drawn.

Thus it was that, six months later, the thirty or forty inhabitants of Job's Flat on Suffering Creek—a little mining camp stowed away in the south-west corner of Montana, almost hidden amongst the broken foothills of the Rocky Mountains—basking in the sunshine of a Sunday afternoon laze, were suddenly startled by the apparition of a small wagon, driven by a smaller man with yellow hair, bearing down upon them. But that which stirred them most surely was the additional sight of a handsome girl, sitting at his side, and, crowded between them on the seat, a pair of small children.

Scipio, in a desperate effort to restore his fortunes, and set his precious family once more on a sound financial basis, had come in search of the gold which report said was to be had on Suffering Creek for the trouble of picking it up.

This vision startled Suffering Creek, which, metaphorically, sat up and rubbed its eyes. Here was something quite unaccustomed. The yellow-haired fragment of humanity at the end of the reins was like nothing they had ever seen; the children were a source of wondering astonishment; but the woman—ah! There was one woman, and one woman

only, on Suffering Creek until Jessie's arrival, and she was only the "hash-slinger" at Minky's store.

The newcomer's face pleased them. Her eyes were fine, and full of coquetry. Her figure was all that a woman's should be. Yes, the camp liked the look of her, and so it set out to give Scipio a hearty welcome.

Now a mining camp can be very cordial in its rough way. It can be otherwise, too. But in this case we have only to do with its cordiality. The men of Suffering Creek were drawn from all sorts and conditions of society. The majority of them lived like various grades of princes when money was plentiful, and starved when Fortune frowned. There were men amongst them who had never felt the softer side of life, and men who had been ruthlessly kicked from that downy couch. There were good men and scoundrels, workers and loafers; there were men who had few scruples, and certainly no morals whatever. But they had met on a common ground with the common purpose of spinning fortune's wheel, and the sight of a woman's handsome face set them tumbling over each other to extend the hand of friendship to her husband.

And the simple-minded Scipio quickly fell into the fold. Nor was it long before his innocence, his mildness, his never-failing good-nature got hold of this cluster of ruffians. They laughed at him—he was a source of endless amusement to them—but they liked him. And in such men liking meant a great deal.

But from the first Scipio's peculiar nature, and it was peculiar, led him into many grievous mistakes. His mind was full of active purpose. He had an enormous sense of responsibility and duty to those who belonged to him. But somehow he seemed to lack any due sense of proportion in those things which were vital to their best interests. Ponderous thought had the effect of turning his ideas upside down, leaving him with but one clear inspiration. He must do. He must act—and at once.

Thus it was he gave much consideration to the selection of the site of his house. He wanted a southern aspect, it must be high up, it must not be crowded amongst the other houses. The twins needed air. Then the nearer he was to

the creek, where the gold was to be found, the better. And again his prospecting must tap a part of it where the diggers had not yet "claimed." There were a dozen and one things to be considered, and he thought of them all until his gentle mind became confused and his sense of proportion completely submerged.

The result was, he settled desperately upon the one site that common sense should have made him avoid. Nor was it until the foundations of the house had been laid, and the walls were already half their full height, that he realized, from the desolation of refuse and garbage strewn everywhere about him, that his home was overlooking the camp "dumps."

However, it was too late to make any change, and, with characteristic persistence, he completed his work and went into residence with his wife and the twins.

The pressure of work lessened, he had a moment in which to look around. And with the thought of his twins on his mind, and all his wife had once been accustomed to, he quickly realized the necessity of green vegetables in his *ménage*. So he promptly flew to the task of arranging a cabbage patch. The result was a foregone conclusion. He dug and planted his patch. Nor was it until the work was completed that it filtered through to his comprehension that he had selected the only patch in the neighbourhood with a heavy underlay of gravel and lime stone.

But his crowning effort was his search for gold. There are well-established geological laws governing the prospector's craft which no experienced gold-seeker ever departs from. These were all carefully explained to him by willing tongues. Then, after poring over all he had learned, and thought and searched for two days and two nights, he finally discovered a spot where no other prospector had staked the ground.

It was a curious, gloomy sort of patch, nearly half-a-mile up the creek from the camp, and further in towards the mountains. Just at this spot the banks of the creek were high, there was an unusual blackness about the soil, and it gave out a faint but unrecognizable odour, that, in the bright mountain air, was quite pleasant. For several hundred yards the ground of this flat was rankly spongy, with an

oozy surface. Then, beyond, lay a black greasy-looking marsh, and further on again the hills rose abruptly with the facets of auriferous-looking soil, such as the prospector loves to contemplate.

Scipio pondered. And though the conditions outraged all he had been told of the craft he was embarking upon, he plunged his pick into this flat, and set to work with characteristic goodwill.

The men of the camp when they discovered his venture shook their heads and laughed. Then their laugh died out and their hard eyes grew serious. But no one interfered. They were all seeking gold.

This was Scipio's position on Suffering Creek, but it does not tell half of what lay somewhere in the back of his quaintly-poised mind. No one who knew him failed to realize his worship for his wife. His was a love such as rarely falls to the lot of woman. And his devotion to his girl and boy twins was something quite beyond words. These things were the mainspring of his life, and drove him to such superlative degrees of self-sacrifice that could surely only have been endured by a man of his peculiar mind.

No matter what the toil of his claim, he always seemed to find leisure and delight in saving his wife from the domestic cares of their home. And though weary to the breaking-point with his toil, and consumed by a hunger that was well-nigh painful, when food was short he never seemed to realize his needs until Jessie and the children had eaten heartily. And afterwards no power on earth could rob him of an hour's romp with the little tyrants who ruled and worshipped him.

Now, as he stood before the littered table, he glanced out at the sun. The morning was advancing all too rapidly. His eyes drifted across to his wife. She was still reading. A light sigh escaped him. He felt he should be out on his claim. However, without further thought he took the boiler of hot water off the stove and began to wash up.

It was the clatter of the plates that made Jessie look up.

"For goodness' sake!" she exclaimed, with exasperation. "You'll be bathing the children next. Say, you can just

leave those things alone. I've only got a bit more to read to the end of the chapter."

"I thought maybe it 'ud help you out some. I——"

"You give me a pain, you sure do," Jessie broke in. "You get right out and hustle gold, and leave things of that sort to others."

"But I don't mind doing it, truth I don't," Scipio expostulated mildly. "I just thought it would save you——"

Jessie gave an artificial sigh.

"You tire me. Do you think I don't know my work? I'm here to do the chores—and well I know it. You're here to do a man's work, same as any other man. You get out and find the gold, I can look after the house—if you can call it a house," she added contemptuously.

Her eyes were quite hopeless as she let them wander over the frowsiness in the midst of which she sat. She was particularly discontented this morning. Not only had her thoughts been rudely dragged back from the seductive contemplation of the doings of the wealthy ones as the dime fiction-writer sees them, but there was a feeling of something more personal. It was something which she hugged to her bosom as a priceless pearl of enjoyment in the midst of a barren, rock-bound life of squalor.

The sight of him meandering about the room recalled these things. Thoughts, while they troubled her, yet had power to stimulate and excite her; thoughts which she almost dreaded, but which caused her exquisite delight. She must get rid of him.

But as she looked about the room something very like dismay assailed her. There were the hated household duties confronting her; duties she was longing to be free of, duties which she was tempted to abandon altogether, with everything else that concerned her present sordid life.

But Scipio knew none of this. His unsuspicious nature left him utterly blinded to the inner workings of her indolent, selfish spirit, and was always ready to accept blame for her ill-humours. Now he hurriedly endeavoured to make amends.

"Of course you can, Jess," he said eagerly. "I don't guess there's another woman around who can manage things

like you. You don't never grumble at things, and goodness knows I couldn't blame you any, if you did. But—but ther' seems such a heap to be done—for you to do," he went on, glancing with mild vengefulness at the litter. "Say," he cried, with a sudden lightening and inspiration, "maybe I could buck some wood for you before I go. You'll need a good fire to dry the kiddies by after you washened 'em. It sure wouldn't kep me long."

But the only effect of his persistent kindliness was to further exasperate his wife. Every word, every gentle intention on his part made her realize her own shortcomings more fully. In her innermost heart she knew that she had no desire to do the work; she hated it, she was lazy. She knew that he was far better than she; good, even noble, in spite of his mental powers being so lamentably at fault. All this she knew, and it weakly maddened her because she could not rise above herself and show him all the woman that was so deeply hidden under her cloak of selfishness.

Then there was that other thought, that something that was her secret. She had that instinct of good that made it a guilty secret. Yet she knew that, as the world sees things, she had as yet done no great harm.

And therein lay the mischief. Had she been a vicious woman nothing would have troubled her, but she was not vicious. She was not even less than good in her moral instincts. Only she was weak, hopelessly weak, and so all these things drove her to a shrewish discontent and peevishness.

"Oh, there's no peace where you are," she cried, passionately flinging her book aside and springing to her feet. "Do you think I can't look to this miserable home you've given me? I hate it. Yes, I hate it all. Why I married you I'm sure I don't know. Look at it. Look round you, and if you have any idea of things at all what can you see but a miserable hog pen? Yes, that's it, a hog pen. And we are the hogs. You and me, and—and the little ones. Why haven't you got some 'get up' about you? Why don't you earn some money, get some somehow so we can live as we've been used to living? Why don't you do something, instead of pottering around here trying to do chores

that aren't your work, an' you can't do right anyway? You make me mad—you do indeed. But there! There's no use talking to you, none whatever!"

"I'm sorry, Jess. I'm real sorry you feel like this."

Scipio left the table and moved to the cupboard, into which he mechanically began to stow the provender. It was an unconscious action and almost pathetic in its display of that kindly purpose, which, where his wife was concerned, was never-failing. Jessie saw, angry as she was, and her fine eyes softened. Perhaps it was the maternal instinct underlying the selfishness that made her feel something akin to a pitying affection for her little husband.

She glanced down at the boiler of water, and mechanically gathered some of the tin plates together and proceeded to wash them.

"I'm kind of sorry, Zip," she said. "I just didn't mean all that. Only—only it makes me feel bad seeing all this around, and you—you always trying to do both a man's and a woman's work. Things are bad with us, so bad they seem hopeless. We're right here with two kiddies and—and ourselves, and there's practically no money and no prospects of there being any. It makes me want to cry. It makes me want to do something desperate. It makes me hate things—even those things I've no right to hate. No, no," as the man tried to stop her, "don't you say anything. Not a word till I've done. You see, I mayn't feel like talking of these things again. Maybe I shan't never have a chance of talking them again."

She sighed and stared out of window.

"I want you to understand things as I see them, and maybe you'll not blame me if I see them wrong. You're too good for me, and I—I don't seem grateful for your goodness. You work and think of others as no other man would do. You don't know what it is to think of yourself. It's me, and the children first with you, and, Zip—and you've no call to think much of me. Yes, I know what you'd say. I'm the most perfect woman on earth. I'm not. I'm not even good. If I were I'd be glad of all you try to do; I'd help you. But I don't, and—and I just don't seem able to. I'm always sort of longing and longing for the

old days. I long for those things we can never have. I think—think always of folks with money, their automobiles, their grand houses, with lots and lots of good things to eat. And it makes me hate—all—all this. Oh, Zip, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm not good. But I'm not, and I—I——"

She broke off and dashed the back of her hand across her eyes in time to wipe away the great tears that threatened to roll down her rounded cheeks. In a moment Scipio was at her side, and one arm was thrust about her waist, and he seized one of her hands.

"You mustn't to cry," he said tenderly, as though she were a child. "You mustn't, Jess—truth. You ain't what you're saying. You ain't nothing like it. You're dear and good, and it's 'cause you're that good and honest you're saying all these things. Do you think I don't know just how you're suffering? Do you? Why, Jess, I know just everything about you, and it nigh breaks my heart to think of all I've brought you to. It ain't you, Jess, it's me who's bad. It's me who's a fool. I hain't no more sense than a buck rabbit, and I ain't sure a new-littered pup couldn't put me to sleep for savvee. Now don't you go to crying. Don't you indeed. I just can't bear to see those beautiful eyes o' yours all red and running tears. And, say, we sure have got better prospects than you're figgering. You see, I've got a claim there's no one else working on. And sure there's minerals on it. Copper—or leastways it looks like copper, and there's micah, an' lots—an' lots of stuff. I'll sure find gold in that claim. It's just a matter of keepin' on. And I'm going to. And then, when we find it, what a blow-out we'll have. We'll get automobiles and houses, and—and we'll have a bunch of sweet corn for supper, same as we had at a hotel once, and then——"

But the woman had suddenly drawn away from his embrace. She could stand no more of her little husband's pathetic hopes. She knew. She knew, with the rest of the camp, the hopelessness of his quest, and even in her worst moments she had not the heart to destroy his illusions. It was no good, the hopelessness of it all came more than ever upon her.

"Zip dear," she said, with a sudden, unwonted tenderness

that had something strangely nervous in it, "don't you get staying around here or I'll keep right on crying. You get out to your work. I'm feeling better now, and you've —you've made things look kind of brighter," she lied.

She glanced out of window, and the height of the sun seemed suddenly to startle her. Her more gentle look suddenly vanished and one of irritability swiftly replaced it.

"Now, won't you let me help you with all these things?" Scipio coaxed.

But Jessie had seemingly quite forgotten her moment of tenderness.

"No," she said sharply. "You get right out to work." Then after a pause, with a sudden warming in her tone, "Think of Jamie and Vada. Think of them, and not of me. Their little lives are just beginning. They are quite helpless. You must work for them, and work as you've never done before. They are ours, and we love them. I love them. Yes"—with a harsh laugh—"better than myself. Don't you think of me, Zip. Think of them, and work for them. Now be off. I don't want you here."

Scipio reluctantly enough accepted his dismissal. His wife's sudden nervousness of manner was not hidden from him. He believed that she was seriously upset, and it pained and alarmed his gentle heart. But the cause of her condition did not enter into his calculations. How should it? The reason of things seemed to be something which his mind could neither grasp nor even inquire into. She was troubled, and he—well, it made him unhappy. She said go and work, work for the children. Ah, yes, her thoughts were for the children, womanly, unselfish thoughts just such as a good mother should have. So he went, full of a fresh enthusiasm for his work and for his object.

Meanwhile Jessie went on with her work. And strangely enough her nervousness increased as the moments went by, and a vague feeling of apprehension took hold of her. She hurried desperately. To get the table cleared was her chief concern. How she hated it. The water grew cold and greasy, and every time she dipped her cloth into it she shuddered. Again and again her eyes turned upon the window surveying the bright sunlight outside. The children playing

somewhere beyond the door were ignored. She was even trying to forget them. She heard their voices, and they set her nerves jangling with each fresh peal of laughter, or shrill piping cry.

At last the last plate and enamelled cup was washed and dried. The boiler was emptied and hung upon the wall. She swabbed the table carelessly and left it to dry. Then, with a rush, she vanished into the inner room.

The moments passed rapidly. There was no sound beyond the merry games of the twins squatting out in the sun, digging up the dusty soil with their fat little fingers. Jessie did not reappear.

At last a light decided step sounded on the creek side of the house. It drew nearer. A moment or two later a shadow flitted across the window. Then suddenly a man's head and shoulders filled up the opening. The head bent forward, craning into the room, and a pair of handsome eyes peered curiously round.

"Hi!" he cried in a suppressed tone. "Hi! Jessie!"

The bedroom curtain was flung aside, and Jessie, arrayed carefully in her best shirtwaist and skirt, suddenly appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were glowing with excitement and fear. But her rich colouring was alight with warmth, and the man stared in admiration. Yes, she was very good to look upon.

CHAPTER II

THE HARVEST OF PASSION

For one passionate moment the woman's radiant face held the gaze of the man. He was swayed with an unwholesome hunger at the sight of her splendid womanhood. The beautiful, terrified eyes, so full of that allurement which ever claims all that is vital in man; the warm colouring of her delicately rounded cheeks, so soft, so downy; the perfect undulations of her strong young figure—these things caught him anew, and again set raging the fire of a reckless, vicious passion. In a flash he had mounted to the sill of the window-opening, and dropped inside the room.

"Say—Jessie," he breathed hotly. "You're—you're fine."

His words were almost involuntary. It was as though they were a mere verbal expression of what was passing through his mind, and made without thought of addressing her. He was almost powerless in his self-control before her beauty. And Jessie's conscience in its weakly life could not hold out before the ardour of his assault. Her eyelids lowered. She stood waiting, and in a moment the bold invader held her crushed in his arms.

She lay passive, yielding to his caresses for some moments. Then of a sudden she stirred restlessly. She struggled weakly to free herself. Then, as his torrential kisses continued, sweeping her lips, her eyes, her cheeks, her hair, something like fear took hold of her. Her struggles suddenly became real, and at last she stood back panting, but with her young heart mutely stirred to a passionate response.

Nor was it difficult, as they stood thus, to understand how nature rose dominant over all that belonged to the higher spiritual side of the woman. The wonderful virility in her

demanded life in the full flood of its tide, and here, standing before her, was the embodiment of all her natural, if baser, ideals.

The man was a handsome, picturesque creature bred on lines of the purer strains. He had little enough about him of the rough camp in which she lived. He brought with him an atmosphere of cities, an atmosphere she yearned for. It was in his dress, in his speech, in the bold daring of his handsome eyes. She saw in his face the high breeding of an ancient lineage. There was such a refinement in the delicate chiselling of his well-moulded features. His brows were widely expressive of a strong intellect. His nose possessed that wonderful aquilinity associated with the highest type of Indian. His cheeks were smooth, and of a delicacy which threw into relief the perfect model of the frame beneath them. His clean-shaven mouth and chin suggested all that which a woman most desires to behold in a man. His figure was tall and muscular, straight-limbed and spare; while in his glowing eyes shone an irresistible courage, a fire of passion, and such a purpose as few women could withstand. And so the wife of Scipio admitted her defeat and yielded the play of all her puny arts, that she might appear sightly in his eyes.

But she only saw him as he wished her to see him. He showed her the outward man. The inner man was something not yet for her to probe. He was one of Nature's anachronisms. She had covered a spirit which was of the hideous stock from which he sprang with a gilding of superlative manhood.

His name was James, a name which, in years long past, the Western world of America had learned to hate with a bitterness rarely equalled. But all that was almost forgotten, and this man, by reason of his manner, which was genial, open-handed, even somewhat magnificent, rarely failed, at first, to obtain the good-will of those with whom he came into contact.

It was nearly nine months since he first appeared on Suffering Creek. Apparently he had just drifted there in much the same way that most of the miners had drifted, possibly drawn thither out of curiosity at the reports of the

gold strike. So unobtrusive had been his coming that even in that small community he at first passed almost unobserved. Yet he was full of interest in the place, and contrived to learn much of its affairs and prospects. Having acquired all the information he desired, he suddenly set out to make himself popular. And his popularity was brought about by a free-handed dispensation of a liberal supply of money. Furthermore, he became a prominent devotee at the poker table in Minky's store, and, by reason of the fact that he usually lost, as most men did who joined in a game in which Wild Bill was taking a hand, his popularity increased rapidly, and the simple-minded diggers dubbed him with the dazzling sobriquet of "Lord James."

It was during this time that he made the acquaintance of Jessie and her husband, and it was astonishing how swiftly his friendship for the unsuspicious little man ripened.

This first visit lasted just three weeks. Then, without warning, and in the same unobtrusive way as he had come, he vanished from the scene. For the moment Suffering Creek wondered; then, as is the way of such places, it ceased to wonder. It was too busy with its own affairs to concern itself to any great extent with the flotsam that drifted its way. Scipio wondered a little more than the rest, but his twins and his labours occupied him so closely that he, too, dismissed the matter from his mind. As for Jessie, she said not a word, and gave no sign except that her discontent with her lot became more pronounced.

But Suffering Creek was not done with James yet. The next time he came was nearly a month later, just as the monthly gold stage was preparing for the road, carrying with it a shipment of gold-dust bound for Spawn City, the nearest banking town, eighty miles distant.

He at once took up his old position in the place, stayed two weeks, staked out a claim for himself, and pursued his intimacy with Scipio and his wife with redoubled ardour.

Before those two weeks were over somehow his popularity began to wane. This intimacy with Scipio began to carry an ill-flavour with the men of the place. Somehow it did not ring pleasantly. Besides, he showed a fresh side to his character. He drank heavily, and when under the influence

of spirits abandoned his well-polished manners, and displayed a coarseness, a savage truculence, such as he had been careful never to show before. Then, too, his claim remained unworked.

The change in public opinion was subtle, and no one spoke of it. But there was no regret when, finally, he vanished again from their midst in the same quiet manner in which he had gone before.

Then came the catastrophe. Two weeks later a gold stage set out on its monthly journey. Sixty miles out it was held up and plundered. Its two guards were shot dead, and the driver mortally wounded. But fortunately the latter lived long enough to tell his story. He had been attacked by a gang of eight well-armed horsemen. They were all masked, and got clear away with nearly thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold.

In the first rush of despairing rage Suffering Creek was unable to even surmise at the identity of the authors of the outrage. Then Wild Bill, the gambler, demanded an accounting for every man of the camp on the day of the tragedy. In a very short time this was done, and the process turned attention upon Lord James. Where was he? The question remained unanswered. Suspicions grew into swift conviction. Men asked each other who he was, and whence he came. There was no answer to any of their inquiries at first. Then, suddenly, news came to hand that the gang, no longer troubling at concealment, was riding roughshod over the country. It was a return to the regime of the "bad man," and stock-raiding and "hold-ups," of greater or less degree, were being carried on in many directions with absolute impunity; and the man James was at the head of it.

It was a rude awakening. All the old peace and security were gone. The camp was in a state of ferment. Every stranger that came to the place was eyed askance, and unless he could give a satisfactory account of himself he had a poor chance with the furious citizens. The future dispatch of gold became a problem that exercised every mind, and for two months none left the place. And this fact brought about a further anxiety. The gang of robbers was a large

one. Was it possible they might attempt a raid on the place? And, if so, what were their chances of success?

Such was the position at Suffering Creek, and the nature of the threat which hung over it. One man's name was in everybody's mind. His personality and doings concerned them almost as nearly as their search for the elusive gold which was as the breath of life to them.

And yet Lord James was in no way deterred from visiting the neighbourhood. He knew well enough the position he was in. He knew well enough all its possibilities. Yet he came again and again. His visits were paid in daylight, carefully calculated, even surreptitiously made. He sought the place secretly, but he came, careless of all consequences to himself. His contempt for the men of Suffering Creek was profound and unaffected. He probably feared no man.

And the reason of his visits was not far to seek. There was something infinitely more alluring to him at the house on the dumps than the gold which held the miners—an inducement which he had neither wish nor intention to resist. He revelled in the joy and excitement of pursuing this wife of another man, and had the camp bristled with an army of fighting men, and had the chances been a thousand to one against him, with him the call of the blood would just as surely have been obeyed. This was the man, savage, crude, of indomitable courage and passionate recklessness.

And Jessie was dazzled, even blinded. She was just a weak, erring woman, thrilling with strong youthful life, and his dominating nature played upon her vanity with an ease that was quite pitiful. She was only too ready to believe his denials of the accusations against him. She was only too ready to—love. The humility, devotion, the goodness of Scipio meant nothing to her. They were barren virtues, too unexciting and uninteresting to make any appeal. Her passionate heart demanded something more stimulating. And the stimulant she found in the savage wooing of his unscrupulous rival.

Now the man's eyes contemplated the girl's ripe beauty, while he struggled for that composure necessary to carry out all that was in his mind. He checked a further rising

impulse, and his voice sounded almost harsh as he put a sharp question.

"Where's Zip?" he demanded.

The girl's eyelids slowly lifted. The warm glow of her eyes made them limpid and melting.

"Gone out to his claim," she said in a low voice.

The other nodded appreciatively.

"Good."

He turned to the window. Out across the refuse-heaps the rest of the camp was huddled together, a squalid collection of huts, uninspiring, unpicturesque. His glance satisfied him. There was not a living soul in view; not a sound except the prattle of the children who were still playing outside the hut. But the latter carried no meaning to him. In the heat of the moment even their mother was dead to the appeal of their piping voices.

"You're coming away now, Jess," the man went on, making a movement towards her.

But the girl drew back. The directness of his challenge was startling, and roused in her a belated defensiveness. Going away? It sounded suddenly terrible to her, and thrilled her with a rush of fear which set her shivering. And yet she knew that all along this—this was the end towards which she had been drifting. The rich colour faded from her cheeks and her lips trembled.

"No, no," she whispered in a terrified tone. For the moment all that was best in her rose up and threatened to defeat his end.

But James saw his mistake. For a second a flash of anger lit his eyes, and hot resentment flew to his lips. But it found no expression. Instead, the anger died out of his eyes, and was replaced by a fire of passion such as had always won its way with this girl. He moved towards her again with something subtly seductive in his manner, and his arms closed about her unresisting form in a caress she was powerless to deny. Passive yet palpitating she lay pressed in his arms, all her woman's softness, all her subtle perfume, maddening him to a frenzy.

"Won't you? I love you, Jessie, so that nothing else on earth counts. I can't do without you—I can't—I can't!"

His hot lips crushed against hers, which yielded themselves all too willingly. Presently he raised his head, and his eyes held hers. "Won't you come, Jess? There's nothing here for you. See, I can give you all you wish for: money, a fine home, as homes go hereabouts. My ranch is a dandy place, and," with a curious laugh, "stocked with some of the best cattle in the country. You'll have horses to ride, and dresses—— See! You can have all you want. What is there here? Nothing. Say, you don't even get enough to eat. Scipio hasn't got more backbone in him than to gather five cents when it's raining dollars." He kissed her upturned face again, and the warm responsive movement of her lips told him how easy his task really was.

But again she pressed him back, so that he held her only at arms' length. Her swimming eyes gazed long and ardently into his.

"It isn't that, Jim," she said earnestly; "it isn't that. Those things don't count. It's—it's you. I—I don't want dresses. I don't want the money. I—I—want you."

Then she started, terrified again.

"But, Jim, why did you come up to this hut?" she cried. "Why didn't you wait for me down in the bush at the river, as usual? Oh, Jim, if anybody sees you they'll shoot you down like a dog——"

"Dog, eh?" cried the man, with a ringing laugh. "Let 'em try. But don't you worry, Jess. No one saw me. Anyway, I don't care a curse if they did."

"Oh, Jim!"

Then she nestled closer to him for a moment of passionate silence, while he kissed her, prolonging the embrace with all the fire with which he was consumed. And after that she spoke again. But now it was the mother that would no longer be denied, even in the midst of her storm of emotion.

"But I—I can't leave them—the little ones. I can't, I can't!" she cried piteously. "Jim, I love you. God knows how badly I love you, but I—I love them, too. They are mine. They are part of me, and—and I can't do without them. No—no. I can't go—I won't go," she hurried on, without conviction. "I can't. I want my babies—my little boy and girl. You say you love me. I know you love me.

Then take them with us, and—and I'll do as you wish. Oh, I'm wicked, I know. I'm wicked, and cruel, and vile to leave Scipio. And I don't want to, but—but—oh, Jim, say you'll take them, too. I can never be happy without them. You can never understand. You are a man, and so strong." He drew her to him again, and she nestled close in his arms. "You don't know what it is to hear a child's voice, and know that it is part of you, your life, one little tiny atom beginning all over again. No, no—I must have them."

She slowly drew herself away, watching his handsome face, half fearfully, half eagerly. She knew in her heart that she was waiting for his verdict, and, whatever it might be, she would have to abide by it. She knew she must do as he wished, and that very knowledge gladdened her, even in spite of her maternal dread of being parted from her babies.

She saw his expression change. She saw the look of perplexity in the sudden drawing together of his finely-marked brows, she saw the half-angry impatience flash into his eyes, she saw this again replaced with a half-derisive smile. And each emotion she read in her own way, moulding it to suit and fall in with her own desires, yet with a willing feeling that his decision should be paramount, that she was there to obey him.

He slowly shook his head, and a curious hardness set itself about his strong mouth.

"Not now," he said. "I would, but it can't be done. See here, Jess, I've got two horses hidden away down there in the bush beside the creek—one for you, and one for me. We can't fetch those kiddies along with us now. It wouldn't be safe, anyhow. We've got sixty-odd miles to ride through the foothills. But see, I'll fetch 'em one day, after, if you must have 'em. How's that?"

"But they'll never let you," cried Jessie. "The whole camp will be up in arms when they know I've gone. You don't know them, Jim. They're fond of Zip, and they'll stand by him."

James laughed contemptuously.

"Say, Jess," he cried, "you come right along with me

now. And if you need those kiddies, not all Suffering Creek —no, nor hell itself—shall stop me bringing 'em along to you." Then he chuckled in an unpleasant manner. "Say, it would tickle me to death to set these mutton-headed gophers jumping around. You'll get those kiddies if you need 'em, if I have to blow hell into this mud-heap of a city."

Jessie's eyes glowed at the man's note of savage strength and confidence. She knew he could and would do as he said, and this very fact yielded her to him more surely than any other display could have done. It was this wonderful daring, this reckless, savage manhood that had originally won her. He was so different from all others, from her puny husband. He swept her along and dazzled her. Her own virility cried out for such a mate, and no moral scruples could hope to stay so strong a tide of nature.

"You'll do it?" she cried fervently. Then she nodded joyously. "Yes, yes, you'll do it. I know it. Oh, how good you are to me. I love you, Jim."

Again she was in his arms. Again his kisses fell hot and fast upon her glowing face. Nature was rushing a strong flood tide. It was a moment that could have no repetition in their lives.

They stood thus, locked in each other's arms, borne along by a passion that was beyond their control—lost to all the world, lost to all those things which should have mattered to them. It was the fervid outpouring of two natures which had nothing that was spiritual in them. They demanded the life of the senses, and so strong was the desire that they were lost to all else.

Then suddenly in the midst of their dream came the disturbing patter of small feet and the joyous innocent laughter of infantile glee. Two tiny mud-stained figures rushed at the doorway and fell sprawling into the hut. They were on their feet again in a moment, laughing and crowing out their delight. Then, as the man and woman sprang apart, they stood round-eyed, wondering and gaping.

Jamie and Vada paused only till the grown-up eyes were turned in their direction, then their chorus broke out in one breath.

"We got fi' 'piders——"

"An' two bugs!"

The important information was fairly shrieked, to the accompaniment of dancing eyes and flushed cheeks.

Jessie gasped. But her emotion was not at the news so rudely broken. It was the breaking of the spell which had held her. Just for one horrific moment she stood staring helplessly at the innocent picture of her four-year-old twins, beautiful in spite of their grimy exterior, beautiful as a Heaven-inspired picture to the mother.

The man smiled. Nor was it an unpleasant smile. Perhaps, somewhere in his savage composition, he had a grain of humour; perhaps it was only the foolish smile of a man whose wits are not equal to so incongruous a situation.

"They're most ev'ry colour," piped Vada, with added excitement.

"Uh!" grunted Jamie in agreement. "An' the bugs has horns."

But the man had recovered himself. The interruption had brought with it a realization of the time he had spent in the hut.

"You'd best go and find more," he said. "There's heaps outside." Then he turned to Jessie. "Come on. We must be going. Have you got the things you need ready?"

But the mother's eyes were on the small intruders. Something was gripping at her heart, and somehow it felt like four small and dirty hands.

"Wher' you goin'?" demanded Vada, her childish curiosity roused, and all her beautiful spiders forgotten for the moment.

Her question remained unanswered, leaving the room in ominous silence. Then Jamie's treble blundered into its midst, dutifully echoing his sister's inquiry.

"'Es, wher' you doin'?"

The man's eyes were narrowly watching the woman's face. He noted the tremulous lips, the yearning light in her eyes. In a moment he was answering the children, lest their innocent words should upset his plans.

"Say, your momma's going for a horse-ride. She's just going right out, and I'm going to show her a dandy place

where she can fetch you, so you can catch heaps an' heaps of bugs and spiders. She's just wanting you to stop right here and catch more bugs, till I come along and fetch you."

"O—oh!" cried Vada, prolonging her exclamation gleefully. "Say, can't us go now?"

"Me do too," murmured her faithful shadow.

One quick glance at the mother's face and the man spoke again.

"Not now, kiddies. I'll come and fetch you. Run along." Then he turned swiftly upon Jessie. "Where's your bundle?" he asked in his usual masterful manner.

And her reply came in a tone of almost heart-broken submission.

"In there," she said, with a glance at the inner room.

The man gave her no time to add anything more. He felt the ground he was treading was more than shaky. He knew that with the coming of these children a tremendous power was militating against him—a power which would need all his wits to combat. He passed into the inner room, and returned in a moment with the girl's bundle. And with his return one glance showed him how nearly his plans were upset. Jessie was clasping Jamie in her arms, kissing him hungrily, tears streaming down her cheeks, while, out of sheer sympathy, little Vada was clinging to her mother's skirts, her small face buried in amongst them, sobbing as though her heart would break.

In a moment he was at her side. This was not a time when any drastic methods could serve him, and he adopted the only course which his shrewd sense told him would be likely to avail. Gently but firmly he took the boy out of her arms.

"You want him to go with us?" he said kindly. "Very well. Maybe we're doing wrong—I mean, for his sake. Anyhow, I'll carry him, and then I'll come back for Vada. It's not good. It's too hard on him, carrying him all that distance—too dangerous. Still, I want you to be happy, Jess. I'd do anything for that, even—even at his expense. So——"

"No—no!" cried the mother, carried away by the fear he expressed so subtly, and warmed by his carefully expressed

sympathy. "Don't take any notice of me. I'm foolish—silly. You're right—he—he couldn't make the journey with us. No, no, we—won't—take him now. Set him down, Jim. I'll go now, and you'll—you'll come back for them. Yes, yes, let's go now. I—I can't stay any—longer. I've left a letter for Zip. Swear I shall have them both. You'll never—never break your word? I think I'd—die without them."

"You shall have them. I swear it." The man spoke readily enough. It was so easy to promise anything, so long as he got her.

But his oath brought neither expression of gratitude nor comment. The woman was beyond mere words. She felt that only flight could save her from breaking down altogether. And, thus impelled, she tore herself from the presence of the children and rushed out of the hut. The horses were down at the creek, and thither she sped, lest her purpose should fail her.

James followed her. He felt that she must not be left by herself to think. But at the door he paused and glanced keenly around him. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. Not a living soul was to be seen anywhere. It was good; his plans had worked out perfectly.

He set Jamie down, and, all unconscious of the little drama being played round his young life, the child stretched out a chubby hand in the direction of the soap-box he and his sister had been playing with.

"'Piders," he observed laconically.

Vada rushed past him to inspect their treasures, her tears already dried into streaks on her dirty little cheeks.

"An' bugs," she cried gleefully, squatting beside the box.

They had forgotten.

The man hurried away down towards the creek, bearing the pitiful bundle of woman's raiment. The girl was ahead, and, as she again came into his view, one thought, and one thought only, occupied his mind. Jessie was his whole world—at that moment.

He, too, had forgotten.

"They've runned away," cried Vada, peering into the box.

"Me don't like 'piders," murmured Jamie definitely.

Vada's great brown eyes filled with tears. Fresh rivulets began to run down the muddy channels on her downy cheeks. Her disappointment found vent in great sobbing gulps.

Jamie stared at her in silent speculation. Then one little fat hand reached out and pushed her. She rolled over and buried her wet face in the dusty ground and howled heart-brokenly. Then Jamie crawled close up beside her, and, stretching himself out, wept his sympathy into the back of her gaping frock.

CHAPTER III

THE AWAKENING OF SCIPIO

At noon the camp began to rouse. The heavy eyes, the languid stretch, the unmeaning contemplation of the noon-tide sunlight, the slow struggles of a somnolent brain. These things were suggested in the gradual stirring of the place to a ponderous activity. The heavy movement of weary diggers as they lounged into camp for their dinner had no suggestion of the greedy passion which possessed them. They had no lightness. Whatever the lust for gold that consumed them, all their methods were characterized by a dogged endeavour which took from them every particle of that nervous activity which belongs to the finely-tempered business man.

The camp was a single row of egregious dwellings, squat, uncouth, stretching away on either side of the veranda-fronted store and "gambling hell" which formed a sort of centre-piece around which revolved the whole life of the village. It was a poor, mean place, shapeless, evil-smelling in that pure mountain air. It was a mere shelter, a rough perch for the human carrion lusting for the orgy of gold which the time-worn carcass of earth should yield. What had these people to do with comfort or refinement? What had they to do with those things calculated to raise the human mind to a higher spiritual plane? Nothing. All that might come later, when, their desires satisfied, the weary body sick and aching, sends fearful thoughts ahead towards the drab sunset awaiting them. For the moment the full tide of youth is still running strong. Sickness and death have no terrors. The fine strength of powerful bodies will not allow the mind to focus such things.

Out of the rugged hills backing the camp the gold-seekers

struggle to their resting-place. Here, one man comes clambering over the rough boulder-strewn path at the base of a forest-clad hill. Here, an atom of humanity emerges from the depths of a vast woodland that dwarfs all but the towering hills. Another toils up a steep hillside from the sluggish creek. Another slouches along a vague, unmade trail. Yet another scrambles his way through a low, dense-growing scrub which lines the sides of a vast ravine, the favoured locality of the gold-seeker.

So they come, one by one, from every direction radiating about the building, which is Minky's store. Their faces are hard. Their skin is tanned to a leathery hue, and is of a texture akin to hide. They are silent, thoughtful men, too. But their silence is of the vast world in which they delve, and their thought is the thought of men absorbed in their quest. No, there is no lightness, even in their happiest moments. To be light, an intelligent swiftness of brain is needed. And these derelicts have little of such. Although, when Minky's spirit has circulated its poison through their veins, they are sometimes apt to assume a burlesque of it.

Now the camp is wide awake. But it is only the wakefulness of the mother who is roused by the hungry crying of her infant. It will slumber again when appetites have been duly appeased.

The milk of human kindness is soured by the intense summer heat. The men are "grouchy." They jostle harshly as they push up to Minky's counter for the "appetizers" they do not need. Their greetings are few, and mostly confined to the abrupt demand, "Any luck?" Then, their noon-day drink gulped down, they slouch off into the long, frowsy dining-room at the back of the store, and coarsely devour the rough fare provided by the buxom Birdie Mason, who is at once the kindliest and worst caterer imaginable.

This good-natured soul's position was not as enviable as one might reasonably have supposed. The only woman in a camp of men, any one of whom might reasonably strike a fortune in five minutes. The situation suggests possibilities. But, alas, Birdie was just a woman, and, in consequence, from a worldly point of view, her drawbacks were many.

She was attractive—a drawback. She was given to a natural desire to stand first with all men—another drawback. She was eminently sentimental—a still greater drawback. But greatest of all she was a sort of public servant in her position as caterer, and, as such, of less than no account from the moment the "beast" had been satisfied.

She had her moments, moments when the rising good-nature of her customers flattered her, when she was fussed over, and petted, as men are ever ready to treat an attractive member of the opposite sex. But these things led no-whither, from a point of view of worldly advantage, and, being just a woman, warm-hearted, uncalculating and profoundly illogical, she failed to realize the pitfalls that lay before her, the end which, all unsuspecting, she was steadily forging towards.

Scipio, like the rest, came into camp for his dinner. His way lay along the bank of the creek. It was cooler here, and, until he neared his home, there were no hills up which to drag his weary limbs. He had had, as usual, an utterly unprofitable morning amidst the greasy ooze of his claim. Yet the glitter of the mica-studded quartz on the hillside, the bright-green and red-brown shading of the milky-white stone still dazzled his mental sight. There was no wavering in his belief. These toilsome days were merely the necessary probation for the culminating achievement. He assured himself that gold lay hidden there. And it was only waiting for the lucky strike of his pick. He would find it. It was just a matter of keeping on.

In his simple mind he saw wonderful visions of all that final discovery. He dreamt of the day when he should be able to install his beautiful Jessie in one of those up-town palaces in New York; when an army of servants should anticipate her every desire; when the twins should be launched upon the finest academies the country possessed, to gorge their young minds to the full with all that which the minds of the children of earth's most fortunate must be stored. He saw his Jessie clad in gowns which displayed and enhanced all those beauties with which his devoted mind endowed her. She should not only be his queen, but the queen of a social world, which, to his mind, had no

rival. And the happiness of such dreams was beyond compare. His labour became the work of a love which stimulated his puny muscles to a pitch which carried him beyond the feeling of any weariness. For himself he wanted nothing. For Jessie and the twins the world was not great enough as a possession.

And was she not worth it? Were they not worth it? Look at her, so splendid! How she bore with him and all his petty, annoying ways! Her disposition was not of this earth, he told himself. Would any other woman put up with his ill-humours, his shortcomings? He realized how very trying he must be to any bright, clever woman. He was not clever, and he knew it, and it made him pity Jessie for the lot he had brought her to.

And the twins. Vada was the image of her mother. The big, round, brown eyes, the soft, childish mouth, the waving brown hair. And Jamie. He had her eyes, too, and her nose, and her beautiful colouring. What a mercy of Providence neither of them resembled him. But, then, how could they, with such a mother? How it delighted him to think that he was working for them, for her. A thrill of delight swept over him, and added a spring to his jaded step. What mattered anything else in the world. He was to give them all that which the world counted as good. He, alone.

But it was not yet. For a moment a shadow crossed his radiant face as he toiled up the hill to his hut. It was gone in a moment, however. How could it stay there with his thought gilded with such high hopes? It was not yet, but it would come—must come. His purpose was invincible. He must conquer and wrench this wealth which he demanded from the bosom of the hard old earth. And then—and then——

"Hello, kiddies," he cried cheerily, as his head rose above the hill-top and his hut and the two children, playing outside it, came into his view.

"Pop-pa!" shrieked Vada, dropping a paper full of loose dirt and stones upon her sprawling brother's back, in her haste to reach her diminutive parent.

"Uh!" grunted Jamie, scrambling to his feet and tottering heavily in the same direction.

There was a curious difference in the size and growth of these twins. Probably it utterly escaped the adoring eyes of their father. He only saw the reflected glory of their mother in them. Their resemblance to her was all that really mattered to him, but, as a matter of fact, this resemblance lay chiefly in Vada. She was like her mother in an extraordinary degree. She was well-grown, strong, and quite in advance of her years, in her speech and brightness of intellect. Little Jamie, while he possessed much of his mother in his face, in body was under-sized and weakly, and his mind and speech, backward of development, smacked of his father. He was absolutely dominated by his sister, and followed her lead in everything with adoring rapture.

Vada reached her father and scrambled agilely up into his work-soiled arms. She impulsively hugged his yellow head to her cheeks with both her arms, so that when Jamie came up he had to content himself by similarly hugging the little man's left knee, and kissing the mud-stains on his trousers into liquid patches.

But Scipio was impartial. He set Vada down and picked her brother up. Then, taking the former's hand in his horny clasp, bore the boy towards the house.

"You found any gold?" inquired Vada, repeating a question she had so often heard her mother put.

"'Es any—dold?" echoed Jamie, from his height above Scipio's head.

"No, kiddies," the man replied, with a slight sigh.

"Oh," said Vada. But his answer had little significance for her.

"Where's your momma?" inquired Scipio, after a pause.

"Momma do hoss-ridin'," replied Jamie, forestalling his sister for once.

"Yes," added Vada. "She gone ridin'. An' they'll come an' take us wher' ther's heaps an' heaps o' 'piders, an' —an' bugs an' things. He said so—sure."

"He? Who?"

They had reached the hut and Scipio set Jamie on the ground as he put his question.

"The dark man," said Vada readily, but wrinkling her forehead struggling for the name.

"Uh!" agreed Jamie. "Mister Dames."

Just for a moment a sharp question lit Scipio's pale eyes. But the little ones had no understanding of it. And the next moment, as their father passed in through the doorway, they turned to the sand and stone castle they had been laboriously and futilely attempting to mould into some shape.

"Now you bring up more stones," cried Vada authoritatively. "Run along, dear," she added patronizingly, as the boy stood with his small hands on his hips, staring vacantly after his father.

Scipio gazed stupidly about the living-room. The slop-stained table was empty. The cookstove fire was out. And, just for a second, the thought flashed through his mind—had he returned too early for his dinner? No, he knew he had not. It was dinner-time all right. His appetite told him that.

For the moment he had forgotten what the children had told him. His simple nature was not easily open to suspicion, therefore, like all people of slow brain, this startling break in the routine of his daily life simply set him wondering. He moved round the room, and, without being aware of his purpose, lifted the curtain of turkey red, which served as a door to the rough larder, and peered in. Then, as he let the curtain fall again, something stirred within him. He turned towards the inner room, and his mild voice called—

"Jess."

His answer was a hollow echo that somehow jarred his nerves. But he called again—

"Jess."

Again came the echo. Then Vada's small face appeared round the door-casing.

"Mom-ma gone hoss-ridin'," she reminded him.

For an instant Scipio's face flushed. Then it paled icily under its tan. His brain was struggling to grasp something which seemed to be slowly enveloping him, but which his honest heart would not let him believe. He stared stupidly at Vada's dirty face. Then, as the child withdrew to her play, he suddenly crossed the room to the curtained bedroom

doorway. He passed through, and the flimsy covering fell to behind him.

For a space the music of childish voices was the only sound to break the stillness. The hum of buzzing insects seemed to intensify the summer heat. For minutes no movement came from the bedroom. It was like the dread silence before a storm.

A strange sound came at last. It was something between a moan and the pained cry of some mild-spirited animal stricken to death. It had no human semblance, and yet—it came from behind the dingy print curtain over the bedroom doorway.

A moment later the curtain stirred and the ghastly face of Scipio suddenly appeared. He moved out into the living-room and almost fell into the Windsor chair which had last been occupied by his wife. A sheet of notepaper was in his shaking hand, and his pale eyes were staring vacantly at it. He was not reading. He had read. And that which he had read had left him dazed and scarcely comprehending. He sat thus for many minutes. And not once did he stir a muscle, or lift his eyes from their fixed contemplation.

A light breeze set the larder curtain fluttering. Scipio started. He stared round apprehensively. Then, as though drawn by a magnet, his eyes came back to the letter in his hand, and once more fixed themselves upon the bold handwriting. But this time there was intelligence in his gaze. There was intelligence, fear, despair, horror; every painful emotion was struggling for uppermost place in mind and heart. He read again carefully, slowly, as though trying to discover some loophole from the horror of what was written there. The note was short—so short—there was not one spark of hope in it for the man who was reading it, not one expression of feeling other than selfishness. It was the death-blow to all his dreams, all his desire.

"I've gone away. I shall never come back. I can't stand this life here any longer. Don't try to find me, for it's no use. Maybe what I'm doing is wicked, but I'm glad I'm doing it. It's not your fault—it's just me. I haven't your courage, I haven't any courage at all. I just can't

face the life we're living. I'd have gone before when he first asked me but for my babies, but I just couldn't part with them. Zip, I want to take them with me now, but I don't know what Jim's arrangements are going to be. I must have them. I can't live without them. And if they don't go with us now you'll let them come to me after, won't you? Oh Zip, I know I'm a wicked woman, but I feel I must go. You won't keep them from me? Let me have them. I love them so bad. I do. I do. Good-bye forever.

"JESSIE."

Mechanically Scipio folded the paper again and sat grasping it tightly in one clenched hand. His eyes were raised and gazing through the doorway at the golden sunlight beyond. His lips were parted, and there was a strange dropping of his lower jaw. The tanning of his russet face looked like a layer of dirt upon a super-whited skin. He scarcely seemed to breathe, so still he sat. As yet his despair was so terrible that his mind and heart were numbed to a sort of stupefaction, deadening the horror of his pain.

He sat on for many minutes. Then, at last, his eyes dropped again to the crushed paper, and a quavering sigh escaped him. He half rose from his seat, but fell back in it again. Then a sudden spasm seized him, and flinging himself round he reached out his slight, tanned arms upon the dirty table, and, his head dropping upon them, he moaned out the full force of his despair.

"I want her!" he cried. "Oh, God, I want her!"

But now his slight body was no longer still. His back heaved with mute sobs that had no tears. All his gentle soul was torn and bleeding. He had not that iron in his composition with which another man might have crushed down his feelings and stirred himself to a harsh defence. He was just a warm, loving creature of no great strength beyond his capacity for human affection and self-sacrifice. And for the time at least, his sufferings were beyond his control.

In the midst of his grief two little faces, and two pairs

of round, wondering eyes appeared in the doorway. Two small infantile minds worked hard at the sight they beheld. Vada, whose quickness of perception was so much in advance of her brother's, murmured in his ear—

"Sleep."

"Uh, seep," nodded the faithful boy.

Then four little bare feet began to creep into the room. Four big brown eyes shone with gleeful anticipation. Four chubby arms were outstretched as though claiming the victim of their childish prank. Vada led, but Jamie was close behind. They stole in, their small feet making not the slightest sound as they tiptoed towards the stricken man. Each, thrilling with excitement, was desperately intent upon frightening him.

"Boo-h!" cried Vada, her round eyes sparkling as she reached Scipio's side.

"Bo-oh!" echoed Jamie a second later, chuckling and gurgling a delight he had no other means of expressing at the moment.

Scipio raised his haggard face. His unsmiling eyes, so pale and unmeaning, stared stupidly at the children. And suddenly the merry smile died out of the young faces, and an odd contraction of their brows suggested a dawning sympathy which came wholly from the heart.

"You'se cryin', poppa," cried Vada impulsively.

"Uh," nodded the boy.

And thereupon great tears welled up into their sympathetic eyes, and the twins wept in chorus. And somehow the tears, which had thus far been denied the man, now slowly and painfully flooded his eyes. He groped the two children into his arms, and buried his face in the soft wavy hair which fell in a tangle about the girl's head.

For some moments he sat thus, something of his grief easing in the flood of almost womanish tears. Until, finally, it was Jamie who saved the situation. His sobs died out abruptly, and the boy in him stirred.

"Me want t' eat," he protested, without preamble.

The man looked up.

"Eat?" he echoed vaguely.

"Yes. Dinner," explained Vada, whose tears were still

flowing, but who never failed as her little brother's interpreter.

There was a moment's pause while Scipio stared down at the two faces lifted so appealingly to his. Then a change came into his expressionless eyes. A smouldering fire began to burn, which seemed to deepen their weakly colouring. His drawn face seemed to gather strength. And somehow even his straw-coloured hair, so scanty, ill-grown and dishevelled, looked less like the stubble it so much resembled. It was almost as though a latent, unsuspected strength were rousing within him, lifting him from the slough of despair by which he was so nearly submerged. It was as though the presence of his twins had drawn from him an acknowledgment of his duty, a sense which was so strongly and incongruously developed in his otherwise uncertain character, and demanded of him a sacrifice of all personal inclination. They were her children. Yes, and they were his. Her children—her children. And she was gone. They had no one to look to, no one to care for them now, but—him.

He sprang to his feet.

"Why, yes, kiddies," he said, with a painful assumption of lightness. "You're needing food sure. Say, I guess we won't wait for your momma. We'll just hand her an elegant surprise. We'll get dinner ourselves."

Jamie gurgled his joyous approval, but Vada was more intelligible.

"Bully!" she cried. "We'll give her a surprise." Then she turned to Jamie. "Surprise is when folks do things that other folks don't guess you're going to, dear," she explained, to his utter confusion.

Scipio went to the larder and gathered various scraps of food, and plates, and anything that seemed to him as being of any possible use in a meal. He re-kindled the fire in the cookstove and made some coffee. That he understood. There was no sign of his despair about him now. Perhaps he was more than usually silent, but otherwise, for the time at least, he had buried his trouble sufficiently deeply out of sight, so that at any rate the inquiring eyes of the happy children could see nothing of it.

They, too, busied themselves in the preparation. Vada

dictated to her father with never flagging tongue, and Jamie carried everything he could lift to and fro, regardless of whether he was bringing or taking away. Vada chid him in her childishly superior way, but her efforts were quite lost on his delicious self-importance. Nor could there be any doubt that, in his infantile mind, he was quite assured that his services were indispensable.

At last the meal was ready. There was nearly everything of which the household consisted upon the table or in close proximity to it. Then, when at last they sat down, and Scipio glanced over the strange conglomeration, his conscience was smitten.

"Seems to me you kiddies need bread and milk," he said ruefully. "But I don't guess there's any milk."

Vada promptly threw herself into the breach.

"On'y Jamie has bread an' milk, pop-pa. Y'see his new teeth ain't through. Mine is. You best cut his up into wee bits."

"Sure, of course," agreed Scipio in relief. "I'll get along down to Minky's for milk after," he added, while he obediently proceeded to cut up the boy's meat.

It was a strange meal. There was something even tragic in it. The children were wildly happy in the thought that they had shared in this wonderful surprise for their mother. That they had assisted in those things which childhood ever yearns to share in—the domestic doings of their elders.

The man ate mechanically. His body told him to eat, and so he ate without knowing or caring what. His distraught mind was travelling swiftly through the barren paths of hopelessness and despair, while yet he had to keep his children in countenance under their fire of childish prattle. Many times he could have flung aside his mask and given up, but the babyish laughter held him to an effort such as he had never before been called upon to make.

When the meal was finished Scipio was about to get up from his chair, but Vada's imperious tongue stayed him.

"We ain't said grace," she declared complainingly.

And the man promptly dropped back into his seat.

"Sure," he agreed helplessly.

At once the girl put her finger-tips together before her nose and closed her eyes.

"Thank God for my good dinner, Amen, and may we help fix up after?" she rattled off.

"Ess," added Jamie, "tank Dod for my dood dinner, Amen, me fix up, too."

And with this last word both children tumbled almost headlong from the bench which they were sharing. Nor had their diminutive parent the heart to deny their request.

The next hour was perhaps one of the hardest in Scipio's life. Nothing could have impressed his hopeless position upon him more than the enthusiastic assistance so cordially afforded him. While the children had no understanding of their father's grief, while with every heart-beat they glowed with a loving desire to be his help, their every act was an unconscious stab which drove him until he could have cried aloud in agony.

And it was a period of catastrophe. Little Vada scalded her hand and had to be petted back to her normal condition of sunny smiles. Jamie broke one of the few plates, and his tears had to be banished by assurances that it did not matter, and that he had done his father a kindness by ridding him of such an ugly plate. Then Vada stumbled into the garbage pail and had to be carefully wiped, while Jamie smeared his sparse hair with rancid dripping and insisted he was "Injun," vociferously proclaiming his desire to "talp" his sister.

But the crowning disaster came when he attempted to put his threat into execution. He seized a bunch of her hair in his two chubby hands and began to drag her round the room. Her howls drew Scipio's attention from his work, and he turned to find them a struggling heap upon the floor. He dashed to part them, kicked over a bucket of drinking water in his well-meant hurry, and, finally, had to rescue them, both drenched to the skin, from the untimely bath.

There was nothing for it but to strip off all their clothes and dress them up in their nightgowns, for as yet he had no knowledge of their wardrobe, and send them out to get warm in the sun, while he dried their day-clothes at the cookstove.

It was the climax. The man flung himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands. The mask had dropped from him. There was no longer any need for pretence. Once more the grief and horror of his disaster broke through his guard and left him helpless. The whole world, his life, everything was engulfed in an abyss of black despair.

He was dry-eyed and desperate. But now somehow his feelings contained an emotion that the first shock of his loss had not brought him. He was no longer a prey to a weak, unresisting submission, the grief of a tortured gentle heart. There was another feeling. A feeling of anger and resentment which slowly grew with each moment, and sent the hot blood surging furiously to his brain. Nor was this feeling directed against Jessie. How could it be? He loved her so that her cruel desertion of him appeared to be a matter for which he was chiefly to blame. Yes, he understood. He was not the husband for her. How could it be otherwise? He had no cleverness. He had always been a failure. No, his anger was not against Jessie. It was the other. It was the man who had robbed him of all he cared for in the world.

His anger grew hotter and hotter. And with this growing passion there came an absolute revulsion of the motive force that had always governed him. He wanted to hurt. He wanted to hurt this man, Lord James. And his simple mind groped for a means to carry out his desire. He began to think more quickly and clearly, and the process brought him a sort of cold calmness. Again his grief was thrust out of his focus, and all his mental energy was concentrated upon his desire. And he conjured up a succession of pictures of the tortures and sufferings he desired for this villain who had so wronged him.

But the pictures were too feeble and wholly inadequate to satisfy. So gentle was his nature, that, even stirred as he was, he could not conceive a fitting punishment for so great an offence. He felt his own inadequacy, his own feebleness to cope with the problem before him, and so he sat brooding impotently.

It was all useless. And as the minutes slipped by his anger began to die out, merging once more into the all-

absorbing grief that underlay it. He was alone. Alone! He would never see her again. The thought chilled him to a sudden nervous dread. No, no, it was not possible. She would come back. She must come back. Yes, yes. She was his Jessie. His beautiful Jessie. She belonged to him. And the children. She loved them. How she loved them. They were theirs. Yes, she would come back. Maybe she would come back at supper-time. She would understand by then. Because she was good, and—and kind, and—— No, no, Fate could never be so cruel as to take her from him.

He rose and paced the floor with nervous, uneven strides. He plunged his hand into his coat pocket and drew out the letter again. He re-read it, with hot eyes and straining thought. Every word seemed to sear itself upon his poor brain, and drive him to the verge of distraction. Why? Why? And he raised his bloodshot eyes to the roof of his hut, and crushed the paper in one desperate hand.

Then suddenly he started. His pale eyes took on a furtive frightened expression. He glanced fearfully round the room as though some one was in hiding to surprise his inspiration. Yes, that was it. Why not? He was not afraid. He was afraid of no one. Yes, yes, he had the means. He must make the opportunity. She was his. No one else had a right to her. It was justifiable. It was no more than justice.

He moved towards the inner room. He was less furtive now. His purpose had startled him at first, but now he was convinced it was right. To a man of his character his resolve once taken there was only one thing to do—to carry it out.

He passed into the bedroom, and, in a few moments, reappeared. Now he was bearing something in his hand. He held it carefully, and in his eyes was something like terror of what he held. The thing he carried was an old-fashioned revolver. It was rusty. But it had a merciless look about it. He turned it up gingerly. Then he opened the breach, and loaded all the six chambers. Then he carefully bestowed it in his coat pocket, where it bulged obtrusively.

Now he moved to the open doorway, and somehow his

original furtiveness had returned to him. Here he paused as the voices of the twins reached and held him. They were still playing in the sun, banking up the sand and stones in their futile attempt at castle building. He breathed hard, as though summoning up all his decision. Then he spoke.

"Say, kiddies," he said firmly. "I'll be right back at supper."

And he moved out without another look in their direction, and walked off in the direction of Minky's store.

CHAPTER IV

SCIPIO BORROWS A HORSE

SCIPIO found an almost deserted camp after floundering his way over the intricate paths amongst the refuse-heaps.

The miners had departed to their claims with a punctuality that suggested Trades Union principles. Such was their existence. They ate to live; they lived to work, ever tracking the elusive metal to the earth's most secret places. The camp claimed them only when their day's work was done; for the rest, it supported only their most urgent needs.

Sunny Oak, lounging on a rough bench in the shadiest part of the veranda facing Minky's store, raised a pair of heavy eyelids, to behold a dejected figure emerge from amidst the "dumps." The figure was bearing towards the store in a dusty cloud which his trailing feet raised at every step. His eyes opened wider, and interested thought stirred in his somnolent brain. He recognized the figure and wondered. Scipio should have been out on his claim by this time, like the rest.

The lean long figure of the lounger propped itself upon its elbow. Curiously enough, lazy as he was, the smallest matter interested him. Had he suddenly discovered a beetle moving on the veranda he would have found food for reflection in its doings. Such was his mind. A smile stole into his indolent eyes, a lazy smile which spoke of tolerant good-humour. He turned so that his voice might carry in through the window which was just behind him.

"Say, Bill," he cried, "here's Zip comin' down the trail."

As though his announcement were sufficient to rouse an equal interest in those inside the store, he returned again to his contemplation of the approaching figure.

"What's he doin' around camp this hour?" inquired a harsh voice from beyond the window.

"Guess I ain't a lightnin' calc'lator," observed Sunny, without withdrawing his gaze.

"Nope," came the prompt retort from the invisible speaker; "guess it 'ud keep you busy trackin' a fun'ral."

"Which don't need contradiction! I'm kind o' makin' holiday these times. Guess you ain't never heerd tell o' the 'rest cure'?"

A rough laugh broke on the drowsy atmosphere.

"Sunny's overworked just now," said another voice, amidst the rattle of poker chips.

"Wher' you bin workin', Sunny?" inquired the harsh voice of the man addressed as Bill.

"Workin'!" cried the loafer, with good-natured scorn. "Say, I don't never let a hobby interfere with the bizness of life."

A half-smothered laugh answered him. Even the exigencies of a poker hand could not quite crush out the natural humour of these men, who always followed on the golden trail of the pioneers.

"Say, what's your bizness?" demanded another voice presently.

"Restin'!" the man on the veranda answered easily.

The shuffle of cards and rattle of chips came with a snigger. And the answering lazy smile of Sunny Oak was good to see. It lit his unshaven face from his unwashed brow to his chin. And to an onlooker it might well have appeared a pity that an intense bodily indolence should so dominate his personality. He looked vastly capable, both mentally and physically.

But his eyes never left the on-coming Scipio. The little man moved with bowed head and trailing footsteps. The utter dispiritedness of his gait stirred even the self-centred watcher. But Scipio saw nothing of Sunny Oak. He saw nothing of anything but the despairing picture in his own mind. The ramshackle shanties which lined one side of the trail were passed unheeded. The yapping of the camp dogs at the unusual sight of so deplorable a figure at this hour of the day was quite unnoticed by him. The shelving rise of

attenuated grass-land which blocked the view of Suffering Creek on his left never for a moment came into his focus. His eyes were on the trail ahead of him, and never more than a few feet from where he trod. And those eyes were hot and staring, aching with their concentration upon the hideous picture which filled his brain.

As Scipio drew near Sunny Oak further bestirred himself, which was a concession not often yielded by that individual to any one. He sat up, and his smile broadened. Then it faded out as he beheld the usually mild expression of the yellow-haired prospector now so set and troubled.

"Gee!" he murmured in an undertone. Then, with an evident effort, he offered a greeting.

"Ho, you, Zip! Drawn a blank way up ther' on your mud-bank?"

Scipio looked up in a dazed fashion. Then he halted and seemed to pull himself together. Finally he spoke.

"Howdy?" he said in a mechanical sort of way.

"Guess I'm a heap better," responded Sunny, with twinkling eyes.

Scipio gazed up at the store in a bewildered way. He saw the great letters in which Minky's name and occupation were inscribed on its pretentious front, and it seemed to bring back his purpose to his distracted mind. Instantly the other's words became intelligible to him, and his native kindliness prompted him.

"You been sick?" he demanded.

"Wal, not rightly sick, but—ailin'." Sunny's smile broadened till a mouthful of fairly decent teeth showed through the fringe of his ragged moustache.

"Ailin'?"

"Yep. Guess I bin overdoin' it."

"It don't do, working too hard in the heat," said Scipio absently.

"Sure," replied Sunny. "It's been a hard job avoidin' it. Ther's allus folk ready to set me workin'. That's just the way o' things. What I need is rest. Say, you ain't workin'?"

Scipio started.

"No. I'm looking for Wild Bill."

Sunny Oak jerked his head backwards in the direction of the window.

"Guess he's at work—in ther'."

"Thanks."

Scipio mounted the veranda and passed along to the door of the store. Sunny's eyes followed him, but he displayed no other interest. With ears and brain alert, however, he waited. He knew that all he required to know would reach him through a channel that was quite effortless to himself. Again he stretched himself out on the bench, and his twinkling eyes closed luxuriously.

Minky's store was very little different from other places of its kind. He sold everything that could possibly be needed in a newly started mining camp. He did not confine himself to hardware and clothing and canned goods, but carried a supply of drugs, stationery and general dry goods, besides liquor in ample quantities, if of limited quality. There was rye whisky, there was gin, and there was some sort of French brandy. The two latter were in the smallest quantities. Rye was the staple drink of the place.

The walls of the store were lined with shelves on every side, and the shelves were full, even overflowing to a piled-up confusion of goods which were stacked around on the floor. In the somewhat limited floor-space there were tables and benches which could be used for the dual purpose of drink and cards. But wherein Minky's store was slightly out of the usual was the fact that he was not a Jew, and adopted no Jewish methods of trading. He was scrupulously honest with his customers, and fairly moderate in his charges, relying on this uncommon integrity and temperateness of disposition to make personal liking the basis of his commercial success.

It was perhaps a much further-sighted policy than one would suppose. Several men had endeavoured to start in the store business in opposition to him, but in each case their enterprise had proved an utter failure. Not a man in the place would trade elsewhere. Minky was just "Minky," whom they liked and trusted. And, what was much more to the point, who was ever ready to "trust" them.

Wild Bill was at the poker table with Minky, Sandy Joyce

and Toby Jenks when Scipio entered the place. He was a gambler out and out. It was his profession. He was known as Wild Bill of Abilene, a man whose past was never inquired into by even the most youthful new-comer, whose present was a thing that none ever saw sufficient reason to question, and whose future suggested nothing so much as the general uncertainty of things human. He was a man of harsh exterior and, apparently, harsh purpose. His eyes were steely and his tongue ironical; he possessed muscles of iron and a knowledge of poker and all its subtleties that had never yet failed him. He was a dead shot with a pistol, and, in consequence, fear and respect were laid at his feet by his fellow-townsmen. He was also Minky's most treasured friend.

Sandy Joyce had to his credit a married past, which somehow gave him a certain authority in the place. He was expected to possess a fund of wisdom in matters worldly, and he did his best to live up to this demand. He was also, by the way, an ex-cowpuncher suffering from gold fever, and between whiles played poker with Wild Bill until he had lost the result of his more regular labours. He was a slight, tall, bright-eyed man of thirty, with an elaborate flow of picturesque language. He was afraid of no man, but all women.

Toby Jenks was as short and squat as his friends were long and thin. He was good-tempered, and spent large remittances which reached him at regular intervals in the lulls which occurred in his desultory search for gold.

Minky, a plain, large man of blunt speech and gruff manners, looked up swiftly as Scipio entered, and a moment later three more pairs of eyes were fixed inquiringly upon the new-comer.

"Struck colour?" inquired Minky, with his gruffest cordiality.

"No."

Scipio's entire attitude had distinctly undergone a change since Sunny Oak's lazy eyes first discovered his approach. Where before the hopelessness of despair had looked out from every line of his mild face, now his mouth was set obstinately, and a decided thrust to his usually retiring chin became

remarkable. Even his wispy hair had an aggression in the manner in which it obtruded from under the brim of his slouch hat. His eyes were nearly defiant, yet there was pleading in them, too. It was as if he were sure of the rightness of his purpose, but needed encouragement in its execution.

For the moment the poker game was stopped, a fact which was wholly due to the interest in the steely eyes of Wild Bill.

"Layin' off?" inquired the gambler, without a moment's softening.

"Guess you're passin' on that mud lay-out of yours," suggested Sandy, with a laugh.

Scipio shook his head, and his lips tightened.

"No. I want to borrow a good horse from Bill here."

The gambler set down the cards he had been shuffling. The statement seemed to warrant his action. He sat back in his chair and bit a chew of tobacco off a black plug. Minky and the others sat round and stared at the little man with unfeigned interest.

"You're needin' a hoss?" demanded Bill, without attempting to disguise his surprise. "What for?"

Scipio drew a hand across his brow; a beady sweat had broken out upon it.

"Oh, nothing to bother folk with," he said, with a painful attempt at indifference. "I've got to hunt around and find that feller, 'Lord' James."

A swift glance flashed round the table from eye to eye. Then Sunny Oak's voice reached them from beyond the window—

"Guess you've a goodish ways to travel."

"Time enough," said Scipio doggedly.

"What you need to find him for?" demanded Wild Bill, and there was a change in the glitter of his fierce eyes. It was not that they softened, only now they had the suggestion of an ironical smile, which, in him, implied curiosity.

Scipio shifted his feet uneasily. His pale eyes wandered to the sunlit window. One hand was thrust in his jacket pocket, and the fingers of it fidgeted with the rusty metal of the gun that bulged its sides. This pressure of interrogation

was upsetting the restraint he was putting on himself. All his grief and anger were surging uppermost again. With a big effort, which was not lost upon his shrewd audience, he choked down his rising emotion.

"Oh, I—I'd like to pay him a 'party call,'" he blurted out.

Minky was about to speak, but Wild Bill kept him silent with a sharp glance. An audible snigger came from beyond the window.

"Guess you know jest wher' you'll locate him?" inquired the gambler.

"No, but I'm going to find him, sure," replied Scipio doggedly. Then he added, with his eyes averted, "Guess I shan't let up till I do."

There was a weak sparkle in the little man's eyes.

"What's your game?" rasped Bill curiously.

"Oh, just nothin'."

The reply caused a brief embarrassed pause. Then the gambler broke it with characteristic force.

"An' fer that reason you're—carryin' a gun," he said, pointing at the man's bulging pocket.

Sandy Joyce ceased stacking his "chips"; Toby squared his broad shoulders and drained an already empty glass. Minky blinked his astonishment, while Wild Bill thrust his long legs out and aggressively pushed his hat back on his head. It was at that moment that curiosity overcame Sunny Oak's habitual indolence, and his face appeared over the window-sill.

"He's stole from me," said Scipio in a low tone.

"What's he stole?" demanded the gambler savagely.

"My wife."

The stillness of the room remained unbroken for some moments. Actions came far easier to these men than mere words. Scipio's words had a paralysing effect upon their powers of speech, and each was busy with thoughts which they were powerless to interpret into words. "Lord" James was a name they had reason to hate. It was a name synonymous with theft, and even worse—to them. He had stolen from their community, which was unforgivable, but this—this was something new to them, something which did not

readily come into their focus. Wild Bill was the first to recover himself.

"How d'you know?" he asked.

"She wrote telling me."

"She went 'cos she notioned it?" inquired Sandy.

"He's stole her—he's stole my Jessie," said Scipio sullenly.

"An' you're goin' to fetch her back?" Bill's question whipped the still air.

"Sure—she's mine."

Scipio's simplicity and single-mindedness brought forth a sigh of intense feeling from his hearers.

"How?" Wild Bill's method of interrogation had a driving effect.

"She's mine, an'—I'm going to get her back." There was pity at the man's obstinate assertion in every eye except Wild Bill's.

"Say, Zip, he'll kill you," said the gambler, after a pause.

"She's my wife. She's mine," retorted Scipio intensely. "An' I'll shoot him dead if he refuses to hand her over."

"Say," the gambler went on, ignoring the man's protest—the idea of Scipio shooting a man like James was too ludicrous—"you're up agin a bad proposition, sure. James has stole your—wife. He's stole more. He's a stage-robber."

"A cattle-thief," broke in Sandy.

"A 'bad man' of the worst," nodded Minky.

"He's all these, an' more," went on Bill, scowling. "He's a low-down skunk, he's a pestilence, he's a murderer. You're goin' to hunt him back ther' to his own shack in the foothills with his gang of toughs around him, an' you're goin' to make him hand back your wife. Say, you're sure crazy. He'll kill you. He'll blow your carkis to hell, an' charge the devil freightage for doin' it."

There was a look of agreement in the eyes that watched Scipio's mild face. There was more: there was sympathy and pity for him, feelings in these men for which there was no other means of expression.

But Scipio was unmoved from his purpose. His underlip protruded obstinately. His pale eyes were alight with purpose and misery.

"He's stole my—Jessie," he cried, "an' I want her back." Then, in a moment, his whole manner changed, and his words came with an irresistible pleading. Hard as was the gambler, the pathos of it struck a chord in him the existence of which, perhaps, even he was unaware.

"You'll lend me a horse, Bill?" the little man cried. "You will, sure? I got fifty dollars saved for the kiddies' clothes. Here it is," he hurried on, pulling out a packet of bills from his hip pocket. "You take 'em and keep 'em against the horse. It ain't sufficient, but it's all I got. I'll pay the rest when I've made it, if your horse gets hurted. I will, sure. Say," he added, with a happy inspiration, "I'll give you a note on my claim—haf of it. You'll do it? You——"

Bill's face went suddenly scarlet. Something made him lower his eyelids. It was as though he could not look on that eager face unmoved any longer. Somehow he felt in a vague sort of way that poor Scipio's spirit was altogether too big for his body. Bigger by far than that of those sitting there ready to deride his purpose, and crush it to a weak yielding such as, in their minds, was the only possible thing for a man of his like.

"You set them bills right back in your dip," he cried, with a savageness that was only a mask to his real feelings; "I don't need 'em. You ken get right out to the barn an' have your pick o' my plugs, an' anythin' you need else. Guess you best take the black mare. She'll carry you all day for a week, sure, an' then laff at you. Get right on, an' —an'—good luck!"

There are actions performed in every man's life for which he can never account, even to himself. Such was the act Wild Bill performed at that moment. Gambling was his living, but his horses were a passion with him. He possessed, perhaps, some of the finest in the country, and he worshipped them. He had never been known to lend a horse to his best friend, and no one but himself had ever been allowed to feed or groom them. He was prouder of them than a father might be of his firstborn son, and as careful of them as any doting mother. Therefore his assent to Scipio's request was quite staggering to his companions. Nor did he know why

he did it, and a furious anger followed immediately upon this unusual outburst of good-nature.

Scipio was profuse in his thanks. But he was cut short with a violence that seemed quite unnecessary. For the moment, at least, Bill hated the little man almost as much as he hated this "Lord" James he was setting out in search of.

After that no word passed until Scipio had left the store for the barn. Bill sat wrapt in moody thought, his fierce eyes lowered in contemplation of his well-shod feet. His cards were forgotten, the men around him were forgotten. Sandy and the storekeeper were watching his harsh face in wonder, while Toby's head was turned in the direction of the departing man. It was Sunny Oak from his post at the window who finally broke the silence.

"Guess you gone plumb 'bug,' Bill," he said, with an amiable grin. Then, as only a flicker of a smile from the others answered him, and Bill ignored his charge altogether, he hurried on, "You're helpin' that misguided feller to a dose of lead he'll never have time to digest. If ever Zip runs foul of James, he'll blow him to hell as sure—as ther's allus work for those as don't need it. An', wot's more, you'll never set eyes on your black mare agin, 'less it's under James' saddle. You're sure 'bug.' You oughter be seen to."

It was only Sunny Oak who would have dared to say so much to the gambler. But then, for some unstated reason, Sunny was a privileged person on Suffering Creek. Nobody paid much attention to the manner in which he allowed his tongue to run on, and, besides, he was too lazy to be afraid of anybody.

Bill looked round.

"You're side-tracked," he observed contemptuously. "James won't shoot Jessie's husband. Maybe he'll kick him out, maybe he'll roast him bad, and tongue-lash him. Anyways, every man's got to play his own hand. An'—it's good to see him playin' hard, win or lose. But Zip'll git back, sure. An' he'll bring my mare with him. Go to sleep, Sunny; your thinkin'-pan's nigh hatched out."

"I don't guess he'll ever get alongside James," observed

Minky thoughtfully. "We've all looked for him a piece. We know he's got a shanty back in the foothills, but I don't seem to remember hearin' of anybody findin' it. I don't guess Zip's wise to where it is."

Bill's eyes lit with a curious fire.

"Guess Zip'll find him," he said quietly. "Maybe it'll take him time——"

"An'," cried Sunny, "how's them pore kiddies to live meanwhiles?"

The loafer fired his little bomb with the desired effect. The men had no answer for some moments. And gradually all eyes fixed themselves upon Bill's face, as though acknowledging his leadership. He answered the challenge in characteristic fashion.

"Guess we'll turn Sunny loose to wet-nurse 'em."

An announcement which set Sunny plunging headlong to his own defence.

"Say, ain't ther' no sort o' peace for a feller as needs rest? You're all mighty smart settin' folks to work. But this is your game, Bill, an' it's up to you to put it thro'. I 'low you'd make an elegant wet-nurse—so soft and motherish."

But Bill had had enough, and turned upon the face at the window in his most savage manner.

"See here," he cried, with fierce irony, "we've all know'd you since Sufferin' Creek was Sufferin' Creek, an' nobody ain't never kicked. But it's kind o' ne'ssary for every feller around these parts to justify 'emselves. Get me? You need 'justifyin'.' Wal, I guess you'll see to them kiddies till Zip comes back. It's going to be your work seein' they don't get fixed into any sort o' trouble, an' when Zip gets back you'll hand 'em over clean an' fixed right. Get that? I'm payin' for their board, an' I'm payin' you a wage. An' you're goin' to do it, or light right out o' here so quick your own dust'll choke you."

"Here, here!" cried Toby, with a delighted laugh.

Sandy grinned into the loafer's angry face, while Minky nodded an unsmiling approval.

"Gee, you beat hell for nerve!" cried Sunny.

"Guess I ken do better. I ken beat you," retorted Bill

contemptuously. "You'll do it, or—you ken start gettin' out now," he added.

Sunny realized his position by the expression of the other men's faces, and, quickly resuming his good-humoured plaint, he acquiesced with a grumble.

"Gee! but it's a tough world," he complained, dropping back on to his bench hurriedly, lest fresh demands should be made upon him, and just in time to witness Scipio leading a beautiful black mare up to the tying-post.

The men in the store turned out at the sound of horse's hoofs, and stood gathered on the veranda. Bill's keen eyes were fixed regretfully on the shining sides of his favourite animal. She was a picture of lean muscle and bone, with a beautiful small head, and ears that looked little larger than well-polished mussel-shells. She stood pawing the ground impatiently while Scipio tied her to the post, and she nuzzled his ribs playfully with her twitching lips in the most friendly spirit. But Bill's eyes were suddenly arrested by the manner in which she was saddled and bridled. Poor Scipio had blundered in a hopeless fashion.

Other eyes, too, had seen the blunder, and Sandy Joyce suddenly pointed.

"Mackinaw! Jest get that," he cried.

"By Gee!" laughed Sunny.

But Wild Bill cut them all short in a surprising manner.

"Say, guess you fellers ain't never made no sort o' mistakes—any o' you. You're laffin' a heap. Quit it, or——" His eyes flashed dangerously. Then, as the men became silent, he darted across to where Scipio was still fumbling with the neck rope.

The little man's attempt at saddling, under any other circumstances, would have brought forth Bill's most scathing contempt. The saddle was set awry upon an ill-folded blanket. It was so far back from the mare's withers that the twisted double cinchas were somewhere under her belly, instead of her girth. Then the bit was reversed in her mouth, and the curb-strap was hanging loose.

Bill came to his rescue in his own peculiar way.

"Say, Zip," he cried in a voice that nothing could soften, "I don't guess you altered them stirrups to fit you. I'll jest

fix 'em." And the little man stood humbly by while he set to work. He quickly unfastened the cinchas, and set the blanket straight. Then he shifted the saddle, and refastened the cinchas. Then he altered the stirrups, and passed on to the mare's bridle—Scipio watching him all the while without a word. But when the gambler had finished he glanced up into his lean face with an almost dog-like gratitude.

"Thanks, Bill," he said. "I never done it before."

"So I guessed." And the gambler's words, though wholly harsh, had no other meaning in them. Then he went on, as Scipio scrambled into the saddle, "You don't need to worry any 'bout things here. Your kiddies 'll be seen to proper till you get back, if you're on the trail a month."

Scipio was startled. He had forgotten his twins.

"Say—you——"

But Bill wanted no thanks or explanations.

"We're seein' to them things—us, an' that all-fired lazy slob, Sunny Oak. Ther' won't be no harm——" He flicked the restive mare, which bounded off with the spring of a gazelle. "Ease your hand to her," he called out, so as to drown Scipio's further protestations of gratitude, "ease your hand, you blamed little fule. That's it. Now let her go."

And the mare raced off in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER V

HUSBAND AND LOVER

WHERE all the trail-wise men of Suffering Creek and the district had failed, Scipio, the incompetent, succeeded. Such was the ironical pleasure of the jade Fortune. Scipio had not the vaguest idea of whither his quest would lead him. He had no ideas on the subject at all. Only had he his fixed purpose hard in his mind, and, like a loadstone, it drew him unerringly to his goal.

There was something absolutely ludicrous in the manner of his search. But fortunately there are few ready to laugh at disaster. Thus it was that wherever he went, wherever he paused amongst his fellows in search of information he was received perfectly seriously, even when he told the object of his search, and the story of its reason.

An ordinary man would probably have hugged such a story to himself. He would have resorted to covert probing and excuse in extracting information. But then it is doubtful if, under such circumstances, his purpose would have been so strong, so absolutely invincible as Scipio's. As it was, with single-minded simplicity, Scipio saw no reason for subterfuge, he saw no reason for disguising the tragedy which had befallen him. And so he shed his story broadcast amongst the settlers of the district until, by means of that wonderful prairie telegraphy, which needs no instruments to operate, it flew before him in every direction, either belittled or exaggerated as individual temperament prompted.

At one ranch the news was brought in from the trail by a hard-faced citizen who had little imagination, but much knowledge of the country.

"Say, fellers," he cried, as he swung out of the saddle at the bunkhouse door, "ther's a tow-headed sucker on the

trail lookin' fer the James outfit. Guess he wants to shoot 'em up. He's a sawed-off mut, an' don't look a heap like scarin' a jack-rabbit. I told him he best git back to hum, an' git busy fixin' his funeral right, so he wouldn't have no trouble later."

"Wher's he from?" some one asked.

"Sufferin' Creek," replied the cowpuncher, "an' seems to me he's got more grit than savvee."

And this opinion was more or less the general one. The little man rode like one possessed, and it was as well that of all his six treasured horses Wild Bill had lent him his black beauty, Gipsy. She was quite untiring, and, with her light weight burden, she travelled in a spirit of sheer delight.

At every homestead or ranch Scipio only paused to make inquiries and then hurried on. The information he received was of the vaguest. James or some of his gang were often seen in the remoter parts of the lower foothills, but this was all. At one farm he had a little better luck, however. Here he was told that the farmer had received an intimation that if he wished to escape being burnt out he must be prepared to hand over four hundred dollars when called upon by the writer to do so; and the message was signed "James."

"So ye see," said the farmer—a man named Nicholls—despondently, "he's som'eres skulkin' around hyar."

"Seems like it," acquiesced Scipio.

Then, of a sudden, a suspicion flashed through the other's mind, and the man-hunter spent an uncomfortable few seconds.

"Say, you're lookin' fer him?" the farmer questioned harshly. Then he leant forward, his eyes lighting with sudden anger. "If I tho't you was——"

But Scipio's mild blue eyes, and his simple reply had a pacific effect at once.

"I'm looking for him because he's stole my wife. And I'm goin' on chasin' till I find him."

There was such mild sincerity in his visitor's manner that it was impossible for the farmer to retain his suspicion.

"What you goin' to do about that four hundred?" inquired Scipio later.

"He'll get no dollars out o' me. I ain't got 'em," replied

Nicholls hopelessly. Then his temper rose. "But I'm just goin' to slep with a gun to my hand, an' he'll get it good an' plenty, if he shoots the life out of me, an' burns every stick I got, after."

Scipio nodded sympathetically.

"I'd feel that ways," he said. "Well, I guess I'll be gettin' on. My mare'll be fed an' rested by this. Thanks for the feed. Guess I'll hunt around this district a piece. Maybe I'll find——"

But suddenly the farmer awoke from the contemplation of his own troubles and eyed the diminutive figure of his guest wonderingly, as he stood up to go.

"Say," he observed critically, "guess you must be bustin' with grit chasin' this feller."

Scipio shook his head.

"No," he said, with a wan smile. "But he's got—my wife."

"Ah."

And there was a world of understanding in the man's monosyllable.

Five minutes later the man-hunter was on the trail again. It was the afternoon of the second day of his quest. He was saddle-sore and weary, but his purpose knew no weakening. Gipsy was going fresh and strong, and though she had already travelled probably a hundred miles in her rider's aimless wanderings, she moved as though she was out for a morning's exercise on a liberal diet of oats.

True to his intention Scipio scoured the district with an excess of enthusiasm which carried him far, and sundown found him amongst the beehive hummocks which form the approach to the greater hills. Up and down these wonderful grassy dunes he roamed searching a resting-place for himself and his mare. There was nothing of the sort in sight, nothing but the endless series of grassy knolls, and the dividing hollows which might conceal anything, from a ranch house to an outlying cattle station. And finally he abandoned all hope of shelter.

He had certainly lost himself. But, even so, he was not greatly concerned. Why should he be? What did it matter? He knew that if the worst came to the worst his

mare could eat her fill of grass, and, for himself, sleep in the open had no terrors. Of food for himself he had not even begun to think. So he rode on until the last blaze of the setting sun dropped behind the sky-line.

He was descending into a hollow, something deeper than usual. Hope ran high that it was one of those hidden breaks, which, at intervals, cross the sea of grassy dunes, and mark a mountain waterway. Nor was he disappointed. A few moments later, to his delight, he found himself gazing into the depths of one of the many rivulets trickling its shallow way between low cut banks. Promptly he made up his mind that it was the place for him to camp.

At the water's edge he scrambled out of the saddle and began to seek a place where his mare could drink. It was a little difficult, for the banks were sharp, and the bushes plentiful, and he had wandered at least a hundred yards in his search for an opening when a human voice abruptly hailed him from the far side of the stream. He looked across without answering, and, to his intense surprise, beheld a horseman on the opposite bank. The man, judging by his appearance, was a cowpuncher, and, to Scipio's simple mind, was, like himself, benighted.

"Hello," he replied at last, after a thoughtful stare.

The man was eyeing the yellow-headed figure with no very friendly eyes, but this fact was lost upon Scipio, who saw in him only a fellow man in misfortune. He saw the lariat on the horn of the saddle, the man's chapps, his hard-muscled broncho pony gazing longingly at the water. The guns at the man's waist, the scowling brow and shifty eyes passed quite unobserved.

"Wher' you from?" demanded the man sharply.

"Suffering Creek," replied Scipio readily.

"Guess you've come quite a piece," said the other, after a considering pause.

"I sure have."

"What you doin' here?"

The man's inquiry rapped out smartly. But Scipio had no suspicion of anybody, and answered quite without hesitation.

"I'm huntin' a man called James. You ain't seen him?"

But the man countered his question with another.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Scipio—and yours?"

In the dying light the man's saturnine features seemed to relax for a moment into something like a smile. But he spoke at once.

"Come right over," he invited. "Guess my name's Abe—Abe Conroy. I'm out chasin' cattle." And the fact that he finished up with a deliberate laugh had no meaning at all for his companion.

Scipio gladly accepted the invitation, and, in response to the man's instructions, moved farther along the stream until he came to a shelving in the bank where his mare could climb down. He crossed over, letting his horse drink by the way, and a few moments later was at his new acquaintance's side.

The stranger's mood seemed to have entirely changed for the better by the time Scipio came up. His smile was almost amiable, and his manner of speech was comparatively jocular.

"So you're chasin' that crook, James," he said easily. "Queer, ain't it?"

"What?"

"Why, he's run off a bunch of our stock. Leastways, that's how I'm guessin'. I'm makin' up to his place right now to spy out things. I was jest waitin' fer the sun to go. Y'see we're organizin' a vigilance party to run—— Say, I'd a notion fer a moment you was one of his gang."

But Scipio disclaimed the honour promptly.

"No. I just need to find him. I'm needin' it bad."

"Wot fer?"

For once the man-hunter hesitated. A quite unaccountable feeling gave him a moment's pause. But he finally answered frankly, as he always answered, with a simple directness that was just part of him.

"He's stole my wife," he said, his eyes directly gazing into the other's face.

"Gee, he's a low-down skunk," declared the other, with a curse. But the ironical light in his eyes quite escaped his companion's understanding.

Scipio was full of his good fortune in falling in with a

man who knew of James' whereabouts. A dozen questions sprang into his mind, but he contented himself with stating his intention.

"I'll ride on with you," he said.

"What, right up to James' lay-out? "

"Sure. That's wher' I'm makin'."

For a moment the man calling himself Conroy sat gazing out at the afterglow of the setting sun. His whole appearance was ill-favoured enough to have aroused distrust in anybody but a man like Scipio. Now he seemed to be pondering a somewhat vexed question, and his brows were drawn together in a way that suggested anything but a clear purpose. But finally he seemed to make up his mind to a definite course. He spoke without turning to his companion, and perhaps it was for the purpose of hiding a lurking derisive smile.

"If you're set on makin' James' shanty, you best come right along. Only "—he hesitated for the barest fraction of a second—" y'see, I'm out after this cattle racket, an' I guess I owe it to my folks to git their bizness thro' without no chance of upset. See? "

Scipio nodded. He saw the man's drift, and thought it quite splendid of him.

"Now, I got to spy out things," the man went on, "an' if you get right up ther' first it'll likely upset things fer me—you goin' ther' to hold him up as it were." His smile was more pronounced. "Now I guess I'll show you where his lay-out is if you'll sure give me your promise to let me hunt around fer ha'f-an-hour around his corrals—'fore you butt in. Then I'll get right back to you an' you can go up, an'—shoot him to hell, if you notion that fancy."

Scipio almost beamed his thanks. The man's kindness seemed a noble thing to him.

"You're a real bully fellow," he said. "Guess we'll start right now? "

The man turned and his shrewd eyes fixed themselves piercingly on the little man's face.

"Yes," he said shortly, "we'll get on."

He led the way, his horse slightly in advance of the mare, and for some time he made no attempt to break the silence

that had fallen. The twilight was rapidly passing into the deeper shadows of night, but he rode amongst the hills as though he were travelling a broad open trail. There was no hesitation, no questioning glance as to his direction. He might have been travelling a trail that he had been accustomed to all his life. At last, however, he glanced round at his companion.

"Say, what you goin' to do when—you get there?" he asked.

"Fetch my wife back," replied Scipio earnestly.

"What'll James be doin'?"

"He can't keep her—she's mine."

"That's so. But—if he notions to keep her?"

Scipio was silent for some moments. His pale eyes were staring straight ahead of him out into the growing darkness.

"Maybe, I'll have to shoot him," he said at last, as though there could be no question about the matter.

The man nodded.

"Got useful guns?" he inquired casually.

"Got one."

"Ah, what is it? Magazine?"

Scipio pulled his antique possession out of his pocket and handed it over for the man's inspection.

"It's all right," he said. "Guess the sights ain't good over a distance, but at close range it'll make a nasty hole."

Conroy took the weapon in his hand. His keen eyes noted the age of the pattern. He also saw the battered condition of the sights, and the clumsy, rusted, protruding hammer. It was six-chambered, and he knew that it must be all of forty years old. One of the earliest pattern revolvers. The sight of it filled him with cruel amusement, but he kept a serious face.

"I 'lows that should bring James to his senses," he observed, as he handed it back to its owner.

Scipio read his answer as approval, and warmed towards him.

"I'd say so," he said, returning his antiquity to his pocket. "You see, a gun's li'ble to rattle a feller like James. A man who can get around when a feller's back's turned, an' make love to his wife, ain't much of a man, is he? I mean

he hasn't much grit. He's a coward sure. If he'd got grit he wouldn't do it. Well, that's how I figger 'bout this James. He's mean, an' a cowardly dog. I don't guess I'll have to use that gun, but I jest brought it along to scare him to his senses, if he needs it. Maybe though he won't need it when he sees me come along—y'see, I'm Jessie's husband —guess that'll fix him sure."

"Guess you got James sized up good," observed the man, with his eyes fixed ahead. "No, I don't see you'll need that gun."

They rode on, Scipio's spirits rising with every yard they travelled. He knew he was nearing his wife with every passing moment. He had no doubts, no fears. So long as he could reach her side he felt that all would be well. In spite of her letter it never entered his head that she cared for the man she had gone off with. He blamed James, and it was no mere figure of speech when he said that he believed he had "stolen" her. He believed such to be the case. He believed she had gone unwillingly. In his mind it was a case of abduction. Again and again he thanked Providence that he had fallen in with this man, Conroy. He was a good fellow, he told himself, a good friend. And his ideas were so coincident with his own about James.

They were approaching the higher hills. Towering, broken crags loomed ahead darkly in the gathering gloom. The vast riven facets cut the sky-line, and black patches of pine forests, and spruce, gave a ghostly, threatening outlook. They must have been riding over two hours when Scipio realized they were passing over a narrow cattle track on the summit of a wooded hill. Then presently their horses began a steep shelving descent which required great caution to negotiate. And as they proceeded the darkness closed in upon them, until they appeared to be making an almost precipitate descent into a vast black pit. There was no light here at all except for the stars above, for the last glow of twilight was completely shut off by the great wall they were now leaving behind them.

No word was spoken. Each man was busy with his horse, and the animals themselves were stumbling and floundering as they picked their uncertain way. A quarter of an hour

of this went by, then, suddenly, ahead, still farther down the slope, two or three dim lights shone up at them like will-o'-the-wisps. They seemed to dance about before Scipio's eyes as he rode. Nor, as he pointed them out to his companion, did he realize that this peculiarity was due to the motion of his mare under him.

"Yep," replied Conroy dryly. "Them's James' lights."

"He's got a large place," said Scipio, with some awe in his tone.

"He sure has," agreed Conroy, smiling in the darkness. "He's got the biggest an' best-stocked ranch in Montana."

"You say he's a—cattle thief?" Scipio was struggling to get things into proper focus.

"He sure is." And Conroy's tone of satisfaction had the effect of silencing further comment by his companion.

A few moments later the descent was completed, and the soft grass under her feet set Gipsy dancing to get on, but Conroy pulled up.

"Here," he said authoritatively, "you set right here while I get on an' get thro' with my business. I'll come along back for you."

Without demur Scipio waited, and his companion vanished in the darkness. The little man had entered into an agreement, and had no desire, in spite of his eagerness to be doing, of departing from the letter of it. So he possessed himself in what patience he could until Conroy's return.

The soft pad of the retiring horse's hoofs on the thick grass died away. And presently one of the twinkling lights ahead was abruptly shut out. The horseman had intervened on Scipio's line of vision. Then the yellow gleam as suddenly reappeared, and the last sign of Conroy passed. The waiting man watched with every faculty alert. His ears and eyes straining for the least unusual sound or sight. But there was none forthcoming.

Then he began to think. He began to consider the situation. He began to picture to himself something of the scene that he hoped would shortly take place between himself and the man James. It was the first time he had thought of the matter deliberately, or attempted to estimate its possibilities. Hitherto he had been too torn by his emotions

to consider anything in detail. And, even now, so imbued was he with the right of his cause that he only saw his own point of view, which somehow made James a mere plaything in his hands.

He found himself dictating his will upon the thief in firm tones. He demanded his wife without heat, but with the knowledge of the power of his gun lying behind his words. He felt the restraint he would use. He would not bully. Who was he to bully after having had Jessie restored to him? James should be dealt with as gently as his feelings would permit him. Yes, thank God, he had no actual desire to hurt this man who had so wronged him. The man was foolish, and he could afford to be generous, having had Jessie restored to him. No, he would try hard to forgive him. It would be a tremendous struggle, he knew, yet he felt, with Jessie restored to him, he ought to make the effort. Somehow, even now, he almost felt sorry for so misguided a——

But his reflections were suddenly cut short by the sound of horses' hoofs returning, and, a moment later, Conroy loomed up in the darkness. He came quite close up before he spoke, and then it was almost in a whisper.

"I've located things," he said, with an air of deep satisfaction. "Guess we'll make Mr. 'Lord' James hunt his hole 'fore we're thro' with him. I figger a rawhide fixed neat about his neck'll 'bout meet his case. An' say, I've news fer you. Ther's some o' his boys around. He's jest right in ther' wher' you ken see that biggish light," he went on, pointing at the illuminated square of a window. "I see him through an open door round back. He's lyin' on a heap o' blankets readin' a book. Ef you git along now you'll get him wher' you need him, an'—an' I wouldn't take no chances. Get a drop on him from outside the door, an'—wal, guess a feller like you'll know what to do after that. I'm gettin' back to home."

Scipio glowed. He felt he could have hugged this good-natured stranger. But he did not altogether agree with the man's suggestion of getting the drop on James. He felt it would hardly be playing the game. However, he intended to be guided by circumstances.

"Thanks, friend," he said, in his simple fashion. "You must let me call you that," he went on eagerly. "You see, you've done something for me to-night I can't never forget. Maybe you've got a wife of your own, and if so you'll sure understand."

"Can't rightly say I've got a—wife," the man replied, "but I ken understan' all right. James is low—doggone low," he added. And his face was turned well away so that he could grin comfortably without fear of the other seeing it.

"Well, so long," said Scipio hastily. "Seeing I shan't see you here when I get back, I'd just like to thank you again."

"So long," replied the other. "An' you needn't to thank me too much."

Scipio urged his mare forward, and the man sat looking after him. And somehow his face had lost something of its satisfied expression. However, he sat there only a moment. Presently he lifted his reins and set his horse at a canter in the direction of one of the more distant lights.

"He's a pore fule," he muttered, "but it's a lousy trick anyways." Thus he dismissed the matter from his mind with a callous shrug.

In the meantime Scipio neared the house from which shone the larger light. As he drew towards it he saw its outline against the starlight. It was a large, two-storeyed frame house of weather-boarding, with a veranda fronting it. There were several windows on the hither side of it, but light shone only in one of them. It was by this light the horseman saw a tie-post some yards from the house. And without hesitation he rode up to it, and, dismounting, secured his mare. Then, following Conroy's directions, he proceeded on foot to the back of the house where he was to find an open door. He turned the angle of the building. Yes, the door was there all right, but whereas Conroy had said that James was lying on his blankets reading, he now discovered that the doorway was filled by that handsome thief's presence.

Before he realized what had happened, Scipio found himself in the full glare of the light from the doorway, and

James was smiling down upon his yellow head with a curious blending of insolence and curiosity.

"I was wondering when you'd get around," he said, without shifting his position. Then, as Scipio made no answer, he bestirred himself. "Come right in," he added, and, lounging out of the doorway, he dropped back into the room. "You'll find things a bit untidy," he went on calmly, "you see I'm making changes in my domestic arrangements. This is temporary, I guess. However, if you don't just mind that, why—come right in."

The man's whole manner was one of good-humoured indifference. There was an unruffled assurance about him that was quite perfect, if studied. Scipio's presence there seemed the last thing of concern to him. And the effect of his manner on his visitor entirely upset all the latter's preconceived intentions. Astonishment was his first feeling. Then a sudden diffidence seized him, a diffidence that was nearly akin to fear of his rival. But this passed in a moment, and was instantly replaced by a hot rush of blood through his small body. All his pictured interview died out of his recollections, and, in place of that calmness with which he had intended to meet the man, he found his pulses hammering and hot anger mounting to his head. The commonest of human passions stirred in him, and he felt it would be good to hurt this man who had so wronged him.

"Where's my wife?" he demanded, with a sudden fierceness.

"Oh—it's that. Say, come right in?"

James was still smiling pleasantly. This time Scipio accepted the invitation without thought of trap or anything else. He almost precipitated himself into the room.

Nor in his fury did he observe his surroundings. He had no eyes for the furnishings, the cheap comfort with which he was surrounded. And though, as James had said, the place was untidy, he saw nothing and none of it. His eyes were on the man; angry, bloodshot eyes, such eyes as those of a furiously goaded dog, driven into a corner by the cruel lash of a bully's whip.

"Yes, that's it. Wher's my wife?" Scipio demanded

threateningly. "You've stole her, and taken her from me. I've come to take her back."

The force of his demands was tinged with the simplicity of a naturally gentle disposition. And maybe, in consequence, something of their sting was lost. The forceful bluster of an outraged man, determined upon enforcing his demands, would probably have stirred James to active protest, but, as it was, he only continued to smile his insolence upon one whom he regarded as little better than a harmless worm.

"One moment," he said, with an exasperating patience, "you say I stole her. To have stolen her suggests that she was not willing to come along. She came with me. Well, I guess she came because she fancied it. You say you're going to take her back. Well," with a shrug, "I kind of think she'll have something to say about going back."

For a moment Scipio stood aghast. He glanced about him helplessly. Then, in a flash, his pale-blue eyes came back to the other's face.

"She's mine, I tell you! Mine! Mine! Mine!" he cried, in a frenzy of rage and despair. "She's mine by the laws of God an' man. She's mine by the love that has brought our kiddies into the world. Do you hear? She's mine by every tie that can hold man and wife together. An' you've stole her. She's all I've got. She's all I want. She's just part of me, and I can't live without her. Ther's the kiddies to home waitin' for her, and she's theirs, same as they are hers—and mine. I tell you, you ain't going to keep her. She's got to come back." He drew a deep breath to choke down his fury. "Say," he went on, with a sudden moderating of his tone and his manner, taking on a pitiful pleading, "do you think you love her? You? Do you think you know what love is? You don't. You can't. You can't love her same as I do. I love her honest. I love her so I want to work for her till I drop. I love her so there's nothin' on earth I wouldn't do for her. My life is hers. All that's me is hers. I ain't got a thought without her. Man, you don't know what it is to love my Jessie. You can't, 'cos your love's not honest. You've taken her same as you'd take any woman for your pleasure. If I was dead, would you marry her? No, never, never, never.

She's a pastime to you, and when you've done with her you'd turn her right out on this prairie to herd with the cattle, if ther' wasn't anywher' else for her to go." Then his voice suddenly rose and his fury supervened again. "God!" he cried fiercely. "Give me back my wife. You're a thief. Give her back to me, I say. She's mine, d'you understand —mine!"

Not for an instant did the smile on James' face relax. Maybe it became more set, and his lips, perhaps, tightened, but the smile was there, hard, unyielding in its very setness. And when Scipio's appeal came to an end he spoke with an underlying harshness that did not carry its way to the little man's distracted brain.

"She wouldn't go back to you, even if I let her—which I won't," he said coldly.

The man's words seemed to bite right into the heart of his hearer. Nothing could have been better calculated to goad him to extremity. In one short, harsh sentence he had dashed every hope that the other possessed. And with a rush the stricken man leapt at denial, which was heart-rending in its impotence.

"You lie!" he shouted. The old revolver was dragged from his pocket and pointed shakingly at his tormentor's head. "Give her back to me! Give her back, or——"

James' desperate courage never deserted him for an instant. And Scipio was never allowed to complete his sentence. The other's hand suddenly reached out, and the pistol was twisted from his shaking grasp with as little apparent effort as though he had been a small child.

Scipio stared helpless and confused while James eyed the pattern of the gun. Then he heard the man's contemptuous laugh and saw him pull the trigger. The hammer refused to move. It was so rusted that the weapon was quite useless. For a moment the desperado's eyes sought the pale face of his would-be slayer. A devilish smile lurked in their depths. Then he held out the pistol for the other to take, while his whole manner underwent a hideous change.

"Here, take it, you wretched worm," he cried, with sudden savagery. "Take it, you miserable fool," he added, as Scipio remained unheeding. "It wouldn't blow

even your fool brains out. Take it!" he reiterated, with a command the other could no longer resist. "And now get out of here," he went on mercilessly, as Scipio's hand closed over the wretched weapon, "or I'll hand you over to the boys. They'll show you less mercy than I do. They're waiting out there," he cried, pointing at the door, "for my orders. One word from me and they'll cut the liver out of you with rawhides, and Abe Conroy'll see it's done right. Get you right out of here, and if ever you come squealing around my quarters again I'll have you strung up by your wretched neck till you're dead—dead as a crushed worm—dead as is your wife, Jessie, to you from now out. Get out of here, you straw-headed sucker, get right out, quick!"

But the tide of the man's fury seemed to utterly pass the little man by. He made no attempt to obey. The pistol hung in his tightly gripping hand, and his under-lip protruded obstinately.

"She's mine, you thief!" he cried. "Give her back to me."

It was the cry of a beaten man whose spirit is unquenchable.

But James had finished. All that was worst in him was uppermost now. With eyes blazing he stepped to the door and whistled. He might have been whistling up his dogs. Perhaps those who responded were his dogs. Three men came in, and the foremost of them was Abe Conroy.

"Here," cried James, his cruel eyes snapping, "take him out and set him on his horse, and send him racing to hell after m'squitoes. And don't handle him too easy."

What happened to him after that Scipio never fully understood. He had a vague memory of being seized and buffeted and kicked into a state of semi-unconsciousness. Nor did he rouse out of his stupor, until, sick and sore in every limb, his poor yellow head aching and confused, he found himself swaying dangerously about in the saddle, with Gipsy, racing like a mad thing, under his helpless legs.

CHAPTER VI

SUNNY OAK PROTESTS

WILD BILL was gazing out across the camp dumps. His expression suggested the contemplation of a problem of life and death, and a personal one at that. Sandy Joyce, too, bore traces suggestive of the weightiest moments of his life. Toby Jenks stood chewing the dirty flesh of a stubby forefinger, while the inevitable smile on Sunny Oak's face made one think of a bright spring morning under cover of a yellow fog.

"How am I to see to them pore kiddies?" the latter was complaining. "I've had to do with cattle, an' mules, an' even hogs in my time, but I sure don't guess you ken set them bits o' mites in a brandin' corral, nor feed 'em oats an' hay, nor even ladle 'em swill for supper, like hogs. Fer other things, I don't guess I could bile a bean right without a lib'ry o' cook-books, so how I'm to make 'em elegant pap for their suppers 'ud beat the Noo York p'lice force. An' as fer fixin' their clothes, an' bathing 'em, why, it 'ud set me feelin' that fulish you wouldn't know me from a patient in a bug-house. It makes me real mad, folks is allus astin' me to get busy doin' things. I'm that sick, the sight of a haf-washened kid 'ud turn my stummick to bile, an' set me cacklin' like a hen with a brood o' ducklings she can't no ways account fer. You'se fellers are a happy lot o' Jonahs to a man as needs rest."

"You're sure doing the cacklin' now," observed Bill contemptuously.

"Maybe he's layin' eggs," murmured Toby vaguely.

The men were standing on the veranda, gathered round the bench on which Sunny Oak was still resting his indolent

body. And the subject of their discourse was Scipio's two children. The father had ridden off on his search for James, and the responsibility of his twins was weighing heavily on those left behind.

"Kind o' handy ladlin' it out to folks," said Sunny, grinning lazily. "But, with all your brightness, I don't guess any o' you could mother them kiddies. No, it's jest 'send Sunny along to see to 'em.' That bein' said, you'll git right back to your poker with a righteous feelin' which makes it come good to rob each other all you know. Psha! You ain't no better'n them lousy birds as lays eggs sizes too big, an' blames 'em on to some moultin' sparrer that ain't got feathers 'nuff to make it welcome at a scratchin' bee."

Sunny's flow was a little overwhelming, and perhaps there was just enough truth in his remarks to make it unadvisable for the others to measure wits with him. Anyway, he received no reply. Bill continued to gaze out at Scipio's hut in a way that suggested great absorption, while Toby had not yet lunched sufficiently off his tattered forefinger. Sandy was the only one of the three apparently alive to the true exigencies of the case, and Sunny addressed himself more exclusively to him.

"Say," he went on, his good-humoured eyes smiling cunningly up into the widower's face, "I've heerd tell that you once did some pore unsuspicious female the dirty trick of marryin' her. Mebbe you'll sure hev' notions 'bout kiddies an' such things. Now, if Wild Bill had come along an' pushed a shootin'-iron into your map, an' said you'll handle Zip's kiddies—wal, I ask you, wot 'ud you ha' done?"

"Told him to git his head cooled some," retorted Sandy promptly.

"Ah, guess you bin saved a heap o' trouble," murmured Sunny. "But if you hadn't said that—which you said you would ha' said—an' you'd got busy as he suggested—wal, what then?"

Sandy cleared his throat, and, in his sudden interest, Toby deferred the rest of his meal.

"Wal, I'd ha' gone right up to the shack an' looked into things."

Sandy's first effort seemed to please him, and, hitching his

moleskin trousers up deliberately, he proceeded with some unction—

"Y'see, ther' ain't nothin' like gettin' a look around. Then you kind o' know wher' you are. You sure need to know wher' you are 'fore you get busy proper. It's most like everything else. If you get on the wrong trail at the start, it's li'ble to lead you wher' you don't want to go. What I says is, hit the right trail at the start, then you got a chance o' gettin' thro' right, which, I take it, is an elegant way o' doin' most things. Wal, havin' located the right trail——"

"We're talkin' o' Zip's twins," murmured Sunny gently.

"Sure, that's where I'm gettin' to——"

"By trail?" inquired Toby seriously.

"Say, you make me tired," retorted Sandy angrily.

"Best quit the trail, then," said Sunny.

"Go to blazes!" cried Sandy, and promptly relapsed into moody silence.

At that moment Bill turned from his contemplation of the house beyond the dumps and fixed his fierce eyes on Sunny's grinning face.

"Here, you miser'ble hoboe," he cried, "get right up out of that, and hump across to Zip's shack. You're doin' enough gassin' fer a female tattin' bee. Your hot air makes me want to sweat. Now, them kiddies 'll need supper. You'll jest ast Minky fer all you need, an' I pay. An' you'll see things is fixed right for 'em."

Sunny lurched reluctantly to his feet. He knew the gambler far too well to debate the point further. He had made his protest, which had been utterly ineffective, so there was nothing left him but to obey the fiercely uttered mandate.

But Sandy Joyce felt that somehow his first effort on behalf of the children had missed fire, and it was his duty not to allow himself to be ousted from the council. So he stayed the loafer with a word.

"Say, you'll be knowin' how to feed 'em?" he inquired gravely.

Sunny's eyes twinkled.

"Wal, mebbe you ken give me pointers," he retorted, with apparent sincerity.

"That's how I was figgerin'," said Sandy cordially. He felt better now about his first effort. "Y'see, Minky's stock is limited some; ther' ain't a heap o' variety, like. An' kiddies do need variety. Y'see, they're kind o' delicate feeders, same as high-bred hosses, an' dogs an' things. Now, dogs need diff'rent meat every day, if you're goin' to bring 'em up right. A friend o' mine sure once told me that meat, good meat, was the best feed fer prize dogs, an' he was a feller that won a heap o' prizes. He had one, Boston bull, I——"

"'ll I need to git dog-biscuit for them kiddies?" inquired Sunny sarcastically.

"Say, you make me sick," cried Sandy, flushing angrily.

"Guess that's how you'll make them kiddies," interposed Toby.

Sandy glanced viciously from one to the other. Then, assuming a superiority that scarcely hid his chagrin, he ignored the interruptions.

"You best ast Minky fer some dandy canned truck," he said decisively, deliberately turning his back on Toby Jenks. "Mebbe a can o' lobster an' one o' them elegant tongues stewed in jelly stuff, an' set in a glass bowl. Y'see, they kids needs nourishin', an' that orter fix them 'bout right. I don't know 'bout them new sides o' sow-belly Minky's jest had in. Seems to me they'll likely need teeth eatin' that. Seein' you ain't a heap at fixin' beans right, we best cut that line right out—though I 'lows there's elegant nourishin' stuff in 'em for hosses. Best get a can o' crackers an' some cheese. I don't guess they'll need onions, nor pickles. But a bit o' butter to grease the crackers with, an' some molasses an' fancy candy, an' a pound o' his best tea seems to me 'bout right. After that——"

"Some hoss physic," broke in Toby, recommencing the chewing of his forefinger.

But Wild Bill's fierce eyes were on Sandy, and the erstwhile married man felt their contempt boring into his very soul. He was held silent, in spite of his anger against the broad-shouldered Toby, and was possessed of a feeling that somehow his second effort had been no more successful than

his first. And forthwith the impression received confirmation in a sudden explosion from Wild Bill.

"Jumpin' mackinaw!" he cried, with a force calculated to crush entirely the remnants of Sandy's conceit. "You'd sure shame a crazy sheep fer intellect." Then he added, with withering sarcasm, "Say, don't you never leave your mouth open more'n two seconds at a time, or you'll get the flies in it, an'—they'll start nestin'."

Then without pause he turned on Sunny and delivered his ultimatum.

"Get busy," he ordered in a tone there was no denying.

And somehow Sunny found himself stirring far more rapidly than suited his indolent disposition.

Having thoroughly disturbed the atmosphere to his liking, Bill left the veranda without another look in his companions' direction, and his way took him to the barn at the back of the store.

The gambler was a man of so many and diverse peculiarities that it would be an impossibility to catalogue them with any degree of satisfactoriness. But, with the exception of his wholesale piratical methods at cards—indeed, at any kind of gambling—perhaps his most striking feature was his almost idolatrous worship for his horses. He simply lived for their well-being, and their evident affection for himself was something that he treasured far beyond the gold he so loved to take from his opponents in a gamble.

He possessed six of these horses, each in its way a jewel in the equine crown. Wherever the vagaries of his gambler's life took him his horses bore him thither, harnessed to a light spring cart of the speediest type. Each animal had cost him a small fortune, as the price of horses goes, and for breed and capacity, both in harness and under saddle, it would have been difficult to find their match anywhere in the State of Montana. He had broken and trained them himself in everything, and, wherever he was, whatever other claims there might be upon him, morning, noon and evening he was at the service of his charges. He gloried in them. He revelled in their satin coats, their well-nourished, muscular bodies, in their affection for himself.

Now he sat on an oat-bin contemplating Gipsy's empty

stall, with a regret that took in him the form of fierce anger. It was the first time since she had come into his possession that she had been turned over to another, the first time another leg than his own had been thrown across her; and he mutely upbraided himself for his folly, and hated Scipio for having accepted her services. Why, he asked himself again and again, had he been such an unearthly fool? Then through his mind flashed a string of blasphemous invective against James, and with its coming his regret at having lent Gipsy lessened.

He sat for a long time steadily chewing his tobacco. And somehow he lost all desire to continue his poker game in the store. His whole mind had become absorbed by thoughts of this James, and though he, personally, had never suffered through the stage-robber's depredations, he found himself resenting the man's very existence. There were no ethical considerations in his mind. His inspiration was purely personal. And though he did not attempt to reduce his hatred to reason, nor to analyze it in any way, the truth of its existence lay in the fact of a deadly opposition to this sudden rise to notoriety of a man of strength, and force of character similar, in so many respects, to his own. Perhaps it was mere jealousy; perhaps, all unknown to himself, there was some deeper feeling underlying it. Whatever it was, he had a strong sympathy with Scipio, and an unconquerable desire to have a hand in the smoothing out of the little man's troubles.

He did not leave the barn, and scarcely even took his eyes off Gipsy's empty stall, until nearly sundown. Then, as he heard the voices of returning prospectors, he set to work on his evening task of grooming, feeding, watering and bedding down his children for the night.

CHAPTER VII

SUNNY OAK TRIES HIS HAND

In the meantime Sunny Oak was executing his orders with a care for detail quite remarkable in a man of his excessive indolence. It was a curious fact, and one that told a great deal of his own character, as well as that of the gambler. His implicit obedience to Wild Bill's orders was born of a deeper knowledge of that individual than was possessed by most of his comrades in Suffering Creek. Maybe Minky, who was Bill's most intimate friend, would have understood. But then Sunny Oak possessed no such privilege. He knew Bill through sheer observation, which had taught him to listen when the gambler spoke as he would listen to a man in high authority over him—or to a man who, without scruple, held him helpless under an irresistible threat. Which power it was inspired his obedience he did not pause to consider. He simply accepted the fact that when Bill ordered he preferred to obey—it was so much easier.

"Hoboe"—the local term for one suffering from his indolent malady—as he was, Sunny Oak was a man of some character. Originally this cloak of indolence in which he wrapped himself had been assumed for some subtle reason of his own. It was not the actual man. But so long had he worn it now that he had almost forgotten the real attributes enshrouded in its folds. As a matter of fact, he was very much a man, and a "live" man, too. He really possessed an extraordinary energy when he chose to exercise it. But it was generally his habit to push his interest aside for the easier course of indifference. However, his capacity was none the less there.

His other possessions, too, were excellent in their way, although he had encouraged the germ of rust in a deplorable

degree. His good-nature would not be denied, and was obvious to all. But an extremely alert mind, an infinite resource of keen, well-trained thought, a profound love of the beautiful, a more commonplace physical courage supported by the rarer moral courage, he contrived to keep well hidden from the vulgar gaze.

These were some of the features so long concealed under the folds of his cloak of indolence that even he had almost forgotten their existence. Thus it was, in all seriousness, he cried out bitterly in protest when an attempt was made to lift the covering and lay bare the man beneath it. And his lamentations were perfectly genuine.

After leaving the store with a sack of provisions over his shoulder he grumbled his way across the dumps to Scipio's house. He cursed the weight he was forced to carry, and anathematized the man who had driven him to so bestir himself. He lamented over this waste of his precious energies, he consigned Scipio and his children to eternity, and metaphorically hurled Jessie headlong to the depths of the uttermost abyss of the nether-world. But he went on. In spite of his foulest language and vilest epithets, it was his full intention to do his best for the children.

What he found on entering Scipio's hut set his small eyes twinkling again. His unclean face creased up into a grin, and, softly tiptoeing to a far corner of the room, he deposited his sack with the greatest care. Then he stood up, and his eyes fixed themselves on a curious heap under the table. It was a tumbled pile of pale blue, dirty white, with a four-legged dash of yellow. And out of the heap he made the forms of two small sleeping children, each hugging in their arms an extremity of a yellow cur pup, also sound asleep, in the shaft of sunlight which flooded in through the open doorway.

Sunny rubbed his eyes and thought hard, nor did he find the process irksome. From the miserable camp pup he glanced at the grubby face of Jamie. Then his eyes passed on to Vada's pretty but equally dirty features. And swift action at once followed his thought. He glanced at the dying fire in the cookstove, and saw the small clothes hanging on the chair in front of it. He felt them; they were

quite dry. Then he tried the kettle on the stove; it still had water in it. Then he went to the fuel-box; yes, there was fuel.

Now with his fingers he replenished the fire, and noiselessly re-filled the kettle. Then he removed the clothes and put the chair aside. The children still slept on. He further investigated the resources of Scipio's *ménage*. He found a wash-bowl and soap and a towel, three things he rarely sought for any purposes of his own. Then, after looking into the cupboard, he shook his head. It was deplorably bare of all but uncleanliness. And it was the former that caused his headshake, not the latter. With some pride he re-stocked the shelves with the liberal purchases he had made at Bill's expense. He had provided everything that a man's mind could conceive as being necessary for the interior of healthy childhood. True, he had made no provision for a yellow pup.

By this time the kettle was boiling, and it served him as a signal. In a harsh, untuneful voice he began to chant an old coon-ditty. The effect of his music was instantaneous as regards the more sensitive ears of the pup. Its eyes opened, and it lifted its head alertly. Then, with a quick wriggle, he sat up on his hind quarters, and, throwing his lean, half-grown muzzle in the air, set up such a howl of dismay that Sunny's melody became entirely lost in a jangle of discords. He caught up his empty sack and flung it at the wailing pup's head. It missed its aim, and in a moment the twins had joined in their yellow friend's lament.

Sunny never quite understood the real cause of that dismal protest—whether it was the sight of him, his doleful singing, or the flinging of the sack. All he knew was that it was very dreadful, and must be stopped as quickly as possible. So, to that end, he began to cajole the children, while he surreptitiously let fly a kick at the pup.

"Say, you bonny kids, you ain't scairt o' poor Sunny Oak," he cried, while a streak of yellow flashed in the sunlight and vanished through the door, a departure which brought with it renewed efforts from the weeping children. "It's jest Sunny Oak wot nobody 'll let rest," he went on coaxingly. "He's come along to feed you supper. Say,"

he cried, labouring hard for inspiration, "it's such a bully supper. Ther's molasses, an' candy, an'—an' lob-ster!"

Whether it was the smacking of his lips as he dwelt on the last word, or whether it was merely the fact that their fright was passing, matters little; anyhow, the cries of the twins died out as suddenly as they began, and their eyes, big and round, gazed wonderingly up at Sunny's unkempt face.

"Who's you, ugly man?" asked Vada at last, her brain working more quickly than her brother's.

"'Ess—ug'y man," added Jamie unmeaningly.

Sunny's hand went up to his face, and he scratched amongst his sparse beard as though to test the accuracy of the accusation. Then he grinned sheepishly.

"Guess I'm jest an ugly fairy that wants to be kind to two lonesome kiddies," he beamed.

"O—oh! You'se a fairy?" said Vada doubtfully.

"'Ess," nodded Jamie, thrilling with wonderment, and eyeing him critically.

Elated with his success, Sunny went on warmly—

"Yep. Jest a fairy, an' I bro't a heap o' good grub fer you kiddies t' eat."

But Vada's small brain was following out its own train of thought, and passed the food question by.

"Awful ugly," she said, half to herself.

"'Ess," muttered Jamie abstractedly.

"Mebbe," said Sunny, with a laugh. "Wal, if you crawl right out o' there an' git around, I got things fixed so we'll hev' a bully time."

But his proposition hadn't the effect he hoped. Instead of moving, Jamie suddenly beat his head with his little clenched fists.

"Me wants yaller pup," he cried, and forthwith howled afresh.

Again Sunny realized his helplessness, and, glancing about for further inspiration, caught sight of an inquiring yellow head peering furtively in through the doorway.

"Why, ther' he is," he cried, vainly hoping to pacify the child. Then he began at once a clumsy encouragement of the dog. "Here, you yeller feller," he cried, flicking his

fingers coaxingly. "Come along! Gee, you're a pretty feller. Hi! come along here."

But the dog made no attempt to move, and Sunny began to lose patience. "Come along, pups," he cried, with increasing force. "Come on, you miser'ble rat. Don't stan' ther' waggin' your fool tail like a whisk-broom. Say, you yaller cur, I'll——" He started to fetch the creature, but in a twinkling it had fled, to the accompaniment of a fresh outburst from Jamie.

"I tho't you was a fairy," protested Vada. "Fairies ken do most anything. You're jest an ugly ole man."

Sunny stood up and drew the back of his hand across his perspiring forehead. He was worried. The fairy business was played out, and he felt that he must begin again. Children were by no means as easy to handle as he had thought. He racked his brains, and suddenly bethought him of another move.

In spite of Jamie's whimpering, he went to the cupboard and produced a tin of molasses. This he carefully opened in full view of Vada's questioning eyes. Jamie had also become silent, watching him intently. He dug his finger into the sticky contents and drew it out. Then he licked his finger with tremendous enjoyment.

"Bully," he muttered, apparently ignoring the children.

Instantly Vada was on her knees, crawling from under the table, followed closely by her faithful shadow. She came cautiously up to Sunny's side and stood up.

"M'lasses?" she inquired, and her eyes spoke volumes.

"O-oh!" muttered Jamie, scrambling to his feet beside her and holding up one fat hand.

Sunny, without replying, allowed them to dip their fingers into the pot and taste the molasses. He felt that the moment was critical, and he would not risk words which might easily set them scuttling back to their stronghold.

His strategy was successful. Up came the hands again, and he knew he had won their confidence. He allowed them another dip into the pot, and then began the business in hand.

"We'll save the rest fer bimeby," he said decidedly. "Meanwhiles we'll fix things right."

"Wot things?" inquired Vada.

"M'lasses," said Jamie, with tearful eyes.

Again Sunny felt the crisis, but he carried the situation with a firm hand.

"Bimeby, laddie," he said cheerfully. "Meanwhiles we'll jest have a wash all round."

And forthwith he set the wash-bowl ready and filled it with warm water. Then, after some consideration and trouble, having discovered a rag which had been used in the household "wash-up," and a piece of soap, he prepared to start on little Vada. But she instantly protested.

"You first, Mister Fairy," she said cheerfully. "My poppa allus washes first. Then we has his water."

"'Ess," agreed Jamie.

And, to his disgust, Sunny was forced to an unwilling ablution, which, by strategy, he had hoped to escape. However, the ordeal was manfully borne, and his reward was quite worth his trouble. Vada promptly exclaimed when she saw his face emerge from the dirty towel, shining with grease off the house-flannel.

"You'se a fairy, sure," she cried, clapping her hands and dancing about gleefully. "On'y fairies can change theirselves. You'se a pretty, pretty man—now. Now, Jamie dear. You next," she added, with feminine assurance. And with clumsy but willing enough hands Sunny Oak contrived to cleanse his charges.

By the time his task was accomplished perfect good-will reigned all round, and the climax was reached when the yellow pup returned of its own accord, and was promptly hugged to Jamie's affectionate little bosom.

The next thing was to prepare the children's supper. This was a far more serious matter for the loafer. But he finally achieved it, having learnt, by the process of cross-questioning the girl, what was usual and therefore expected. However, it was not without some difficulty that he succeeded in providing an adequate meal, which consisted of bread and milk, with bread and molasses as a sort of dessert. For himself, he was forced to fare off a tin of lobster and tea. Still, his difficulties were not of much consequence so long as the children were satisfied. And any bother to

himself was his own fault, in having relied for a moment on Sandy Joyce's ideas of a menu.

Supper over and the table cleared, he decided on further catechizing little Vada on points that still were a mystery to him. So, with Jamie busy on the floor endeavouring to solve the mystery of the pup's wagging tail, he lit his pipe and took Vada on his knee. He endeavoured to recall incidents of his own childhood; to remember something of his own early routine. But somehow nothing was very clear.

He had washed the children and given them food. Those things seemed to him to be perfectly sound. Well, what next? It was a little difficult. He glanced at the sun. Surely bed would be quite in order. Bed—ah, yes, that was a happy thought. He remembered now, when he was young he always used to get himself into trouble purposely so they would send him to bed. But with this thought came the regretful recollection that his predilection for bed was quickly discovered, and his further penalties took the form of the buckle end of his father's waist-belt. However, he put the proposition with much tact.

"Say, kiddies," he began, "how soon does your momma put you to bed?"

Vada shook her wise little head.

"Momma don't. Poppa does."

"And when's that?" he inquired, driving at his point deliberately.

"When momma says."

Vada was fastening and unfastening the man's dirty waistcoat with great interest.

"An' when does your momma say it?" Sunny persisted.

"When poppa's done the chores."

"Ah!"

He felt himself on the wrong tack, and cast about for a fresh line of argument.

"Guess you kiddies like bed some," he hazarded doubtfully.

"Me like m'lasses," piped Jamie, who had managed to get the pup's tail over his shoulder, and was hanging on to it with both hands. Vada shrieked as the pup began to yelp.

"Oh, look at Jamie," she cried. "He's pulling Dougal's tail right out. You're a naughty, naughty boy."

"Not naughty," protested Jamie, pulling harder.

Sunny reached down and released the mongrel, who promptly turned round and licked the boy's face. Jamie fought him with his little clenched fists, and finally began to cry.

Again Sunny went to the rescue, and with some difficulty peace was restored. Then he went back to his subject.

"Guess we'll hev to go to bed right now," he suggested, with an air of authority.

"Momma ain't back," said Vada, her eyes round and wondering.

"She'll be right along presently," lied Sunny.

"'Ess," declared Jamie, "an'—an'—we go find 'piders an'—an' bugs."

Vada nodded.

"Lots an' lots."

"That's to-morrow," said Sunny, taking his cue wonderingly.

"Poppa ain't back neither," protested Vada.

"He's gone visitin'," said Sunny. "Maybe he'll be late. Guess he's havin' a hand at poker down at the store."

Sunny was getting uncomfortably hot. Lies came easily enough to him in the ordinary way, but with these poor children it was somehow different.

"Poppa don't play poker," defended Vada. "On'y wicked men does."

"'Ess," agreed Jamie.

"That's so." Sunny felt himself on dangerous ground.

He smoked on thoughtfully for some moments. He felt that a desperate move was required, and considered how best to make it. Finally he resolved that he must assert his authority. So, setting Vada on the ground, he stood up.

"Bed," he said, with a great assumption of finality.

Vada's eyes rolled ominously, and a pucker came to her little sunburnt brow. Jamie offered no preliminary, but howled at once. And when, after the slightest hesitation, Vada joined in his lament, Sunny's distress became pitiable. However, he managed to ease his feelings by several well-

directed mental curses at Wild Bill's head, and all those others concerned in reducing him to his present position. And with this silently furious outburst there came a brain-wave of great magnitude.

"First in bed sure gets most m'lasses," he cried, darting to the cupboard door and holding the well-smeared pot up above his head.

The children's cries ceased, and for a second they stood staring up at him. Then, like a pair of rabbits, they turned and ran for the bedroom, vanishing behind the curtain amidst shrieking excitement. Sunny followed them with the molasses and a handful of crackers.

They were both on the bed when he passed into the room, huddling down under a couple of cotton blankets. The man glanced round him. On the other side of the room was the big bed where their father and mother slept. Both beds were unmade, and the room was littered with feminine garments in a manner that suggested the mother's hasty flight. Hardened as he was, the sight and all it suggested depressed him. But he was not allowed much time for reflection. Two childish voices shrieked at him at once.

"Me first!" they cried in one breath.

And Sunny ladled them out molasses and crackers to their hearts' content. When they had eaten all he thought good for them Vada scrambled to her knees.

"Prayers," she said, and clasped her hands before her face.

Jamie wobbled up to her side and imitated her. And Sunny stood by listening wonderingly to something that brought back a world of recollection to him. It brought him more. It laid before him a mental picture of his present manhood which somehow nauseated him. But he stood his ground till the final "Amens," then he hustled the twins almost roughly into the blankets, and, having extracted a promise from them not to leave the bed again until he returned, hurried out of the room.

He stood for a moment in the living-room. He was in a doubt that almost confused him. Mechanically he looked at the stove. The fire was quite safe. The window was secure. Then he moved to the door. There was a lock to

it and a key. He passed out, and, locking the door behind him, removed the key.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, drinking in a breath of the evening air, "five minutes more o' that an' I'd 'a' bin singin' funeral hymns over my past life. Gee!"

Ten minutes later he was in Wild Bill's hut down at the camp, and had finished his account of his adventures.

"Say," he finished up peevishly, "ther's things a feller can do, an' things he sure can't. I tell you right here I ain't learned how to cluck to my chicks, an' I ain't never scratched a worm in my life. I 'low I'm too old to git busy that ways now. If you're goin' to raise them kids fer Zip while he's away, it'll need a committee o' us fellers. It's more'n one feller's job—much more. It needs a wummin."

Bill listened patiently until his deputy had aired his final grievance. His fierce eyes had in them a peculiar twinkle that was quite lost on Sunny in his present mood. However, when the injured man had finished his tale of woe the gambler stretched his long legs out, and lolled back in his chair with a fresh chew of tobacco in his mouth.

"You ain't done too bad," he said judicially. "That m'lasses racket was a heap smart. Though—say, you'll get around ther' come sun-up to-morrer, an' you'll fix 'em right all day. Maybe Zip 'll be back later. Anyways, you'll fix 'em."

"Not on your life——" began Sunny, in fierce rebellion. But Bill cut him short.

"You'll do it, Sunny," he cried, "an' don't you make no mistake."

The man's manner was irresistibly threatening, and Sunny was beaten back into moody silence. But if looks could have killed, Bill's chances of life were small indeed.

"Guess you're off duty now," the gambler went on icily. "You're off duty till—sun-up. You're free to get drunk, or—what in hell you like."

Sunny rose from his seat. His rebellious eyes were fiercely alight as he regarded his master.

"May your soul rot!" he cried venomously. And with this final impotent explosion he slouched out of the hut.

"Dessay it will," Bill called after him amiably. "But it ain't started yet."

But his jibe was quite lost on the angry Sunny, for he had left him with the haste of a man driven to fear of whither his anger might carry him.

Left alone, Wild Bill chuckled. He liked Sunny, but despised his mode of life with all the arrogant superiority of a man of great force, even if of indifferent morals. He had no patience with a weakened manhood. With him it was only strength that counted. Morality was only for those who had not the courage to face a mysterious future unflinchingly. The future concerned him not at all. He had no fears of anybody or anything, either human or superhuman. Death offered him no more terrors than Life. And whichever was his portion he was ready to accept it unquestioningly, unprotestingly.

He allowed the hoboe time to get well clear of his shack. Then he stood up and began to pace the room thoughtfully. A desperate frown depressed his brows until they met over the bridge of his large thin nose. Something was working swiftly, even passionately, in his brain, and it was evident that his thoughts were more than unpleasant to himself. As the moments passed his strides became more aggressive, and his movements were accompanied by gesticulations of a threatening nature with his clenched fists.

At last he paused in his walk, and dropped again into his chair. Here he sat for a long while. Then, of a sudden, he lifted his head and glanced swiftly about his bare room. Finally he sprang to his feet and crushed his slouch hat on his head, and, crossing over to the oil-lamp on the table, blew it out. Then he passed out into the night, slamming and locking the door behind him.

The night was dark, and the moon would not rise for at least another hour. The air was still laden with the heat of the long summer's day, and it hummed with the music of stirring insect life. He strode along the trail past the store. He glanced at the lighted windows longingly, for he had an appointment for a game in there that night. But he passed on.

As he came to the camp dumps he paused for a moment

to take his bearings. Then he continued his way with long, decided strides, and in a few minutes the dim outline of Scipio's house loomed up before him. He came close up, and walked slowly round it. At one window he paused, listening. There was not a sound to be heard outside. At the window of the bedroom he listened a long time. No, he could not even hear the children breathing.

At last he reached the door which Sunny had locked. He cautiously tried the handle, and the sound brought a whimper from the yellow pup within. He cursed the animal softly under his breath and waited, hoping the wretched creature would settle down again. He heard it snuff at the foot of the door, and then the soft patter of its feet died away, and he knew that the poor thing had satisfied itself that all was well.

He smiled, and sat down at the foot of the door. And, with his knees drawn up into his arms, he prepared for his long vigil. It was the posting of the night sentry over Scipio's twins.

CHAPTER VIII

WILD BILL THINKS HARD—AND HEARS NEWS

WILD BILL stretched himself drowsily. It was noon. He knew that by the position of the patch of sunlight on the floor, which he gazed at with blinking eyes. Presently he reached out his long arms and clasped his hands behind his head. He lay there on his stretcher bed, still very sleepy, but with wakefulness gaining ascendancy rapidly. He had completed two successive nights of "sentry-go" over Scipio's twins, never reaching his blankets until well after sun-up.

For some minutes he enjoyed the delicious idleness of a still brain. Then, at last, it stirred to an activity which once again set flowing all the busy thought of his long night's vigil. Further rest became impossible to a man of his temperament, and he sprang from his blankets and plunged his face into the bucket of fresh water which stood on an adjacent bench. In five minutes he was ready for the business of the day.

It was to be a day of activity. He felt that. Yet he had made no definite plans. Only all his thoughts of the previous night warned him that something must be done, and that it was "up to him to get busy."

A long wakeful night is apt to distort many things of paramount interest. But the morning light generally reduces them to their proper focus. Thus it is with people who are considered temperamental. But Bill had no such claims. He was hard, unimaginative, and of keen decision. And over-night he had arrived at one considerable decision. How he had arrived at it he hardly knew. Perhaps it was one of those decisions that cannot be helped. Certain it was that it had been arrived at through no definite course of reasoning. It had simply occurred to him and received his approval at

once. An approval, which, once given, was rarely, if ever, rescinded. This was the man.

He had first thought a great deal about Scipio. He felt that the time had come when his fate must be closely inquired into. The blundering efforts of Sunny Oak were so hopelessly inadequate in the care of the children, that only the return of their father could save them from some dire domestic catastrophe.

Sunny apparently meant well by them. But Bill hated well-meaning people who disguised their incompetence under the excellence of their intentions. Besides, in this case it was so useless. These two children were a nuisance, he admitted, but they must not be allowed to suffer through Sunny's incompetence. No, their father must be found.

Then there was his mare, Gipsy; and when he thought of her he went hot with an alarm which no threat to himself could have inspired. This turn of thought brought James into his focus. That personage was rarely far from it, and he needed very little prompting to bring the outlaw into the full glare of his mental limelight. He hated James. He had seen him rarely, and spoken to him perhaps only a dozen times, when he first appeared on Suffering Creek. But he hated him as though he were his most bitter personal enemy.

He had no reason to offer for this hatred, beyond the outlaw's known depredations and the constant threat of his presence in the district. At least no reason he would have admitted publicly. But then Wild Bill was not a man to bother with reasons much at any time. And it was the venomous hatred of the man which now drove him to a decision of the first importance. And such was his satisfaction in the interest of his decision, that, for the time being, at least, poker was robbed of its charm, faro had become a game of no consequence whatever, and gambling generally, with all its subtleties as he understood them, was no longer worth while. He had decided upon a game with a higher stake than any United States currency could afford. It was a game of life and death. James, "Lord" James, as he contemptuously declared, must go. There was no room for him in the same district as Wild Bill of Abilene.

It would be useless to seek the method by which this decision was reached. In a man such as Bill the subtleties of his motives were far too involved and deeply hidden. The only possible chance of estimating the truth would be to question his associates as to their opinion. And even then such opinions would be biassed by personal understanding of the man, and so would be of but small account.

Thus Minky would probably have declared that his decision was the result of his desire for the welfare of the community in which he claimed his best friends. Sandy Joyce would likely have shaken his head, and declared it was the possibility of something having happened to his mare Gipsy. Toby Jenks might have had a wild idea that Bill had made his "pile" on the "crook" and was "gettin' religion." Sunny Oak, whose shrewd mind spent most of its time in studying the peculiarities of his fellows, might have whispered an opinion to himself, when no one was about, to the effect that Bill couldn't stand for a rival "boss" around Suffering Creek.

Any of these opinions might have been right, just as any of them might have been very wide of the mark. Anyhow, certain it is that no citizen of Suffering Creek would, even when thoroughly drunk, have accused Bill of any leaning towards sentimentalism or chivalry. The idea that he cared two cents for what became of Scipio, or his wife, or his children, it would have been impossible to have driven into their heads with a sledge-hammer. And maybe they would have been right. Who could tell?

His decision was taken without any definite argument, without any heroics. He frankly declared to himself that James must go. And having decided, he, equally frankly, declared that "the proposition was up to him." This was his silent ultimatum, and, having delivered it, there was no turning back. He would carry it out with as little mercy to himself as he would show to any other concerned.

The men of Suffering Creek thought they knew this man. But it is doubtful if anybody, even the man himself, knew Wild Bill. Probably the nearest approach to a fair estimate of him would have been to describe him as a sort of driving force to a keen brain and hot, passionate heart. Whether he

possessed any of the gentler human feelings only his acts could show, for so hard and unyielding was his manner, so ruthless his purpose when his mind was made up, that it left little room for the ordinary observer to pack in a belief of a softer side to the man.

Ten minutes after performing his primitive ablutions Wild Bill was eating breakfast in the dining-room at the store, with Minky sitting opposite to him. The storekeeper was telling him of something that happened the night before, with a troubled expression in his honest eyes.

"I was wonderin' when you'd get around," he said, as soon as Birdie Mason had withdrawn to the kitchen. "I'd have given a deal for you to have been playin' last night. I would sure. There was three fellers, strangers, lookin' for a hand at poker. They'd got a fine wad o' money, too, and were ready for a tall game. They got one with Irish O'Brien, an' Slade o' Kentucky, but they ain't fliers, an' the strangers hit 'em good an' plenty. Guess they must ha' took five hundred dollars out of 'em."

Bill's sharp eyes were suddenly lifted from his plate. He was eating noisily.

"Did you locate 'em—the strangers?" he grated.

"That's sure the pinch," said Minky, wiping his broad forehead with a coloured handkerchief. The heat in the dining-room was oppressive. "I've never see 'em before, an' they didn't seem like talkin' a heap. They were all three hard-lookin' citizens, an'—might ha' been anything from bum cowpunchers to——"

"Sharps," put in Bill, between noisy sips at his coffee.

"Yes."

Minky watched a number of flies settle on a greasy patch on the bare table.

"Y'see," he went on, after a thoughtful pause, "I don't like strangers who don't seem ready tongued—none of us do, since the stage-robbin' set in."

"You mean——" Bill set his cup down.

Minky nodded.

"We ain't sent out a parcel of gold for months, an' I'm kind o' full up with dust about now. Y'see, the boys has got to cash their stuff, and I'm here to make trade, so—wal,

I jest got to fill myself with gold-dust, an' take my chances. I'm mighty full just now—an' strangers worry me some."

"You're weakenin'," said Bill sharply, but his eyes were serious, and suggested a deep train of swift thought. Presently he reached a piece of bread and spread molasses on it.

"Guess you're figgerin' it 'ud be safer to empty out."

Minky nodded.

"And these strangers?" Bill went on.

"They've lit out," said Minky ruefully. "I ast a few questions of the boys. They rode out at sun-up."

"Where did they slep?"

"Don't know. Nobody seems to know."

Minky sighed audibly. And Bill went on eating.

"Ain't heerd nothing o' Zip?" the storekeeper inquired presently.

"No."

"'Bout that mare o' yours?"

Bill's face suddenly flushed, and his fierce brows drew together in an ominous frown, but he made no answer. Minky saw the change and edged off.

"It's time he was gettin' around."

Bill nodded.

"I was kind of wonderin'," Minky went on thoughtfully, "if he don't turn up—wot's to happen with them kids?"

"I ain't figgered."

Bill's interest was apparently wandering.

"He'll need to be gettin' around or—somethin's got to be done," Minky drifted on vaguely.

"Sure."

"Y'see, Sunny's jest a hoboe."

"Sure."

"Don't guess Zip's claim amounts to pea-shucks neither," the storekeeper went on, his mind leaning towards the financial side of the matter.

"No."

"Them kids 'll cost money, too."

Bill nodded, but no one could have detected any interest in his movement.

"How'd it be to get that claim worked for him—while he's away?"

Bill shrugged.

"Mebbe Zip 'll be gettin' back," he said.

"An' if he don't."

"You mean?"

There was interest enough in Bill now. His interrogation was full of suppressed force.

"Yes. James."

Bill sprang to his feet and kicked back his chair. The sudden rage in his eyes was startling, even to Minky, who was used to the man. However, he waited, and in a moment or two his friend was talking again in his usually cold tone.

"I'll jest git around an' see how Sunny's doin'," he said.

Then he drew out a pipe and began to cut flakes of tobacco from a black plug.

"See here, Minky," he went on, after a moment's pause. "You need to do some thinkin'. How much dust have you got in the store?"

"'Bout twenty thousand dollars."

"Whew!" Bill whistled softly as he packed the tobacco in his pipe. "An elegant parcel for strangers to handle."

The storekeeper's face became further troubled.

"It sure is—if they handle it."

"Jest so."

Bill's pipe was alight now, and he puffed at it vigorously, speaking between the puffs.

"Y'see, this feller James plays a big game. Cattle duffin' and ord'n'ry stage-robbin' ain't good enough, nor big enough, to run his gang on. He needs gold stages, and we ain't sendin' gold stages out. Wal, wot's the conclusion? I ast you?"

"He'll hev to light out, or——"

"Jest so. Or he'll get around here to—look into things. Those strangers last night were mebbe 'lookin' into things.' You'll need to stow that dust where the rats can't gnaw it. Later we'll think things out. Meanwhile there's one thing sure, we don't need strangers on Suffering Creek. There's enough o' the boys around to work the gold, an' when they

get it they mostly know what to do with it. Guess I'll get on up to Zip's shack."

The two men walked out into the store. Minky in a pessimistic mood passed in behind his counter. This question of gold had bothered him for some weeks. Since the first stage-robbing, and James' name had become a "terror" in the district, he had opened a sort of banking business for the prospectors. Commercially it appealed to him enormously. The profits under his primitive methods of dealing with the matter were dazzlingly large, and, in consequence, the business became a dominant portion of his trade. Nor was it until the quantity of gold he bought began to grow, and mount into thousands of dollars' worth, that the difficulties of his traffic began to force themselves upon him. Then it was that he realized that if it was insecure to dispatch a gold stage laden with the property of the prospectors, how was he to be able to hold his stock at the store with any greater degree of security.

The more he thought of the matter the greater the difficulties appeared. Of course he saw possibilities, but none of them offered the security he needed. Then worry set in. History might easily repeat itself on Suffering Creek. James' gang was reported to be a large one. Well, what if he chose to sweep down upon the camp, and clean the place out. Herein lay the trouble. And in consequence his days and nights were none too easy.

He had never spoken of the matter before. It was not a subject to be discussed with anybody. But Bill was different from the rest, and, for several days, Minky had sought an opportunity of unburdening himself to his friend. Now, at last, he had done so, and, in return, had received small enough comfort. Still he felt he had done the best thing.

CHAPTER IX

THE FORERUNNER OF THE TRUST

BILL passed straight through the store and set out across the town dumps. And it would have been impossible to guess how far he was affected by Minky's plaint. His face might have been a stone wall for all expression it had of what was passing behind it. His cold eyes were fixed upon the hut ahead of him without apparent interest or meaning. His thoughts were his own at all times.

As he drew near he heard Sunny's voice raised in song, and he listened intently, wondering the while if the loafer had any idea of its quality. It was harsh, nasal and possessed as much tune as a freshly sharpened "buzz-saw." But his words were distinct. Far too distinct Bill thought with some irritation.

"A farmer ast the other day if we wanted work.
Sez we, 'Ol' man, the labour?' sez he, 'It's binding wheat.'
Sez we, 'Ol' man, the figger?' 'A dollar an' a ha'f the sum.'
Sez we, 'Ol' man, go an' tickle yerself, we'd a durned sight sooner bum!'

'Anythin' at all, marm, we're nearly starvin',
Anything to hel-l-lp the bummers on their wa-ay,
We are three bums an' jolly good chums,
An' we live like Royal Turks,
An' with good luck we bum our chuck,
An' it's a fool of a man wot works.'"

Just as Sunny was about to begin the next verse Bill appeared in the doorway, and the vocalist was reduced to a pained silence by his harsh criticism.

"You'd orter be rootin' kebbeges on a hog ranch wi' that

voice," he said icily. "You're sure the worst singer in America."

Then he glanced round for the children. They were nowhere to be seen. Sunny was at the cookstove boiling milk in a tin "billy." His face was greasy with perspiration, and, even to Bill's accustomed eyes, he looked dirtier than ever. He stood now with a spoon poised, just as he had lifted it out of the pot at the moment of the other's entrance.

"Where's the kids?" the latter demanded sharply.

Sunny shifted his feet a little uneasily and glanced round the dirty room. The place looked as though it hadn't been cleaned for a month. There was a hideous accumulation of unwashed utensils scattered everywhere. The floor was unswept, let alone unwashed. And the smell of stale food and general mustiness helped to add to the keenness of the visitor's nervous edge as he waited for the man's reply.

"Guess they're out on the dumps playin' at findin' gold," Sunny said, with a slightly forced laugh. "Y'see, little Vada's staked out a claim on a patch of elegant garbage, an' is digging fer worms. Them's the gold. An' Jamie's playin' 'bad man' an' swoopin' down on her and sneakin' her worms. It's a new game. Y'see, I thought it out and taught 'em how to play it. They're a heap struck on it, too. I——"

But words somehow failed him under the baleful stare of the other's eyes. And turning back to the milk he fell into a stupid silence.

"You'll get right out an' huyk them kiddies off'n those dumps," cried Bill sharply. "You got no more sense in your idjot head than to slep when your eyes shut. Diggin' worms on the dumps! Gee! Say, if it ain't enough to give 'em bile and measles, an'—an' spots, then I don't know a 'deuce-spot' from a hay-rake. Git right out, you loafin' bum, an' fetch 'em in, an' then get the muck off'n your face, an' clean this doggone shack up. I'd sure say you was a travellin' hospital o' disease by the look of you. I'm payin' you a wage and a heap good one, so git out—an' I'll see to that darn milk."

Argument was out of the question, so Sunny adopted the

easier course of obedience to his employer's orders. He dropped the spoon into the milk with a suddenness that suggested resentment, and shuffled out, muttering. But Bill followed him to the door.

"How?" he inquired threateningly.

"I didn't say nothin'," lied Sunny.

"I didn't jest guess you did," retorted Bill sarcastically. And he watched his man hurry out into the sunlight with eyes that had somehow become less severe.

He waited where he was for some moments. Then he turned back into the room and stared disgustedly about him.

"If a feller can't fix two kiddies right an' cook 'em pap without mussin' things till you feel like dying o' colic at the sight, he ain't fit to rob hogs of rootin' space," he muttered. "I'd—— Gee-whiz! Ther's that doggone milk raising blue murder wi'——"

He rushed to the stove where the boiling milk was pouring over the sides of the pot in a hissing, bubbling stream. He clutched at the "billy," scalding his fingers badly, jerked it off the stove, upset the contents on the floor and flung the pot itself across the room, where it fell with a clatter upon a pile of dirty tin plates and pannikins. He swore violently and sucked his injured fingers, while, in angry dismay, he contemplated the additional mess his carelessness had caused. And at that moment Sunny returned, leading two grubby-faced infants by the hand.

"I got 'em back," he cried cheerfully. Then his shrewd eyes took in the situation at a glance, and they sparkled with malicious glee.

"Gee," he cried, releasing the youngsters and pointing at the mess on the stove and floor. "Now ain't that a real pity? Say, how d'you come to do that? It sure ain't a heap of trouble heatin' a drop o' milk. Most any fule ken do that. I tho't you savvied that, I sure did, or I'd ha' put you wise. Y'see, you should jest let it ha' come to the bile, an' then whip it off quick. My, but it's real foolish! Ten cents o' milk wasted for want of a little sense."

"Our dinner milk," cried Vada in consternation. "All gone."

"All dorn," echoed Jamie, flinging himself on the floor

and dipping his fingers into the mess and licking them with grave appreciation.

In a moment he was joined by the inevitable yellow pup, which burnt its tongue and set up a howl. Vada ran to the animal's assistance, fell over Jamie's sprawling legs and rolled heavily in the mess.

For some seconds confusion reigned. Sunny darted to Vada's rescue, sent the pup flying with a well-directed kick, picked the weeping girl up, and tried to shake some of the milk from her dirty clothing. While Bill grabbed Jamie out of the way of any further mischief. The boy struggled furiously to free himself.

"Me want dinner milk," he shouted, and beat the gambler's chest with both his little fists.

"You kicked Dougal!" wailed Vada, from under Sunny's arm.

And at that moment a mild voice reached them from the open doorway—

"Why, what's happenin'?"

Bill and Sunny turned at once. And the next instant the children were shrieking in quite a different tone.

"Pop-pa," they shouted, with all the power of their childish lungs. The men released them, and, with a rush, they hurled themselves upon the small person of their father.

Scipio set a bundle he was carrying upon the floor and scrambled Jamie into his arms and kissed him. Then he kissed Vada. After that he stood up, and, in a peculiarly dazed fashion gazed about him, out of a pair of blackened and bloodshot eyes, while the children continued to cling to him.

The two onlookers never took their eyes off him. Sunny Oak gazed with unfeigned astonishment and alarm, but Bill merely stared. The little man was a pitiable object. His clothes were tattered. His face was bruised and cut, and dry blood was smeared all round his mouth. Both eyes were black, and in one of them the white was changed to a bright scarlet.

James' men had done their work all too well. They had handled their victim with the brutality of the savages they were.

Scipio let his eyes rest on Bill, and, after a moment's hesitation, as though gathering together his still scattered wits, spoke his gratitude.

"It was real kind of you lendin' me Gipsy. I set her back in the barn. She's come to no harm. She ain't got saddle-sore, nor—nor nothin'. Maybe she's a bit tuckered, but she's none the worse, sure."

Bill clicked his tongue, but made no other response. At that moment it would have been impossible for him to have expressed the thoughts passing through his fierce mind. Sunny, however, was more superficial. Words were bursting from his lips. And when he spoke his first remark was a hopeless inanity.

"You got back?" he questioned.

Scipio's poor face worked into the ghost of a smile.

"Yes," he said. And the awkwardness of the meeting drove him to silently caressing his children.

Presently Sunny, who was not delicate-minded, pointed at his face.

"You—you had a fall?"

Scipio shook his head.

"You see, I found him and—his boys got rough," he explained simply.

"Gee!"

There was no mistaking Sunny's anger. He forgot his usual lazy indifference. For once he was stirred to a rage that was as active and volcanic as one of Wild Bill's sudden passions.

But the gambler at last found his tongue, and Sunny was given no further opportunity.

"What you got there?" he asked, pointing at the parcel Scipio had deposited on the floor.

The little man glanced down at it.

"That?" he said hazily. "Oh, that's bacon an' things. I got 'em from Minky on my way up. He told me you'd sure got grub up here, an' I didn't need to get things. But I guessed I couldn't let you do all this now I'm back. Say," he added, becoming more alert. "I want to thank you both, you bin real good helping me out."

Bill swallowed some tobacco juice, and coughed violently.

Sunny was eaten up with a rage he could scarcely restrain. But Scipio turned to the children, who were now clinging silently to his moleskin trousers.

"Guess we'll get busy an' fix things up," he said, laying caressing hands upon them. "You'll need your dinners, sure. Poppa's got nice bacon. How's that?"

"Bully," cried Vada promptly. Now that she had her father again everything was "bully." But Jamie was silently staring up at the man's distorted features. He didn't understand.

Wild Bill recovered from his coughing, suddenly bestirred himself.

"Guess, we'd best git goin', Sunny," he said quietly. "Zip'll likely need to fix things up some. Y'see, Zip," he went on, turning to the father, "Sunny's done his best to kep things goin' right. He's fed the kiddies, which was the most ne'ssary thing. As for keppin' the place clean,"—he pointed at the small sea of milk which still stood in pools on the floor—"I don't guess he's much when it comes to cleanin' anything—not even hisself. I 'low he's wrecked things some. Ther's a heap of milk wasted. Howsum——"

"Say!" cried the outraged Sunny. But Bill would allow no interruption.

"We'll git goin'," he said, with biting coldness. "Come right along. So long, Zip," he added, with an unusual touch of gentleness. "I'll be along to see you later. We need to talk some."

He moved over to Sunny's side, and his hand closed upon his arm. And somehow his grip kept the loafer silent until they passed out of the hut. Once outside the gambler threw his shoulders back and breathed freely. But he offered no word. Only Sunny was inclined to talk.

"Say, he's had a desprit bad time," he said, with eyes ablaze.

But Bill still remained silent. Nor did another word pass between them until they reached Minky's store.

The moment they had departed Scipio glanced forlornly round his home. It was a terrible home-coming. Three days ago in spite of all set-backs and shortcomings, hope had

run high in his heart. Now—— He left the twins standing and walked to the bedroom door. He looked in. But the curtains dropped from his nerveless fingers and he turned back to the living room, sick in mind and heart. For one moment his eyes stared unmeaningly at the children. Then he sat down on the chair nearest the table and beckoned them over to him. They came, thrilled with awe in their small wondering minds. Their father's distorted features fascinated yet horrified them.

Jamie scrambled to one knee and Vada hugged one of the little man's arms.

"We'll have to have dinner, kiddies," he said, with attempted lightness.

"Ess," said Jamie absently. Then he reached up to the wound on his father's right cheek, and touched it gently with one small finger. It was so sore that the man flinched, and the child's hand was withdrawn instantly.

"Oose's hurted," he exclaimed.

"Pore poppa's all hurt up," added Vada tearfully.

"Not hurt proper," said Scipio, with a wan smile. "Y'see, it was jest a game, an'—an' the boys were rough. Now we'll git dinner."

But Vada's mind was running on with swift childish curiosity, and she put a sudden question.

"When's momma comin' back? " she demanded.

The man's eyes shifted to the open doorway. The golden sunlight beyond was shining with all the splendour of a summer noon. But for all his blackened eyes saw there might have been a grey fog of winter outside.

"Momma? " he echoed blankly.

"Ess, momma," cried Jamie. "When she tomin'? "

Scipio shook his head and sighed.

"When she comin'? " insisted Vada.

The man lowered his eyes till they focused themselves upon the yellow pup, now hungrily licking up the cold milk.

"She won't come back," he said at last, in a low voice. Then with a despairing gesture, he added: "Never! never! " And his head dropped upon Jamie's little shoulder while he hugged Vada more closely to his side as though he feared to lose her too.

CHAPTER X

THE TRUST

It was a blazing afternoon of the "stewing" type. The flies in the store kept up a sickening hum, and tortured suffering humanity—in the form of the solitary Minky—with their persistent efforts to alight on his perspiring face and bare arms. The storekeeper, with excellent forethought, had showered sticky papers, spread with molasses and mucilage, broadcast about the shelves, to ensnare the unwary pests. But though hundreds were lured to their death by syrupy drowning, the attacking host remained undiminished, and the death-traps only succeeded in adding disgusting odours to the already laden atmosphere. Fortunately, noses on Suffering Creek were not over-sensitive, and the fly, with all his native unpleasantness, was a small matter in the scheme of the frontiersman's life, and, like all other obstructions, was brushed aside physically as well as mentally.

The afternoon quiet had set in. The noon rush had passed, nor would the re-awakening of the camp occur until evening. Ordinarily the quiet of the long afternoon would have been pleasant enough to the hard-working storekeeper. For surely there is something approaching delight in the leisure moments of a day's hard and prosperous work. But just now Minky had little ease of mind. And these long hours, when the camp was practically deserted, had become a sort of nightmare to him. The gold-dust stored in the dim recesses of his cellars haunted him. The outlaw, James, was a constant dread. For he felt that his store held a bait which might well be irresistible to that individual. Experienced as he was in the ways of frontier life, the advent of the strangers of the night before had started a train of alarm which threatened quickly to grow into panic.

He was pondering this matter when Sunny Oak, accom-

panied by the careless Toby Jenks, lounged into the store. With a quick, almost furtive eye the storekeeper glanced up to ascertain the identity of the newcomers. And, when he recognized them, such was the hold his alarm had upon him, that his first thought was as to their fitness to help in case of his own emergency. But his fleeting hope received a prompt negative. Sunny was useless, he decided. And Toby—well, Toby was so far an unknown quantity in all things except his power of spending on drink the money he had never earned.

"Ain't out on your claim?" he greeted the remittance man casually.

"Too blamed hot," Toby retorted, winking heavily.

Then he mopped his face and ordered two whiskies.

"That stuff won't cool you down any," observed Minky, passing behind his counter.

"No," Toby admitted doubtfully. Then with a bright look of intelligence. "But it'll buck a feller so it don't seem so bad—the heat, I mean." His afterthought set Sunny grinning.

Minky set out two glasses and passed the bottle. The men helped themselves, and with a simultaneous "How!" gulped their drinks down thirstily.

Minky re-corked the bottle and wiped a few drops of water from the counter.

"So Zip's around," he said, as the glasses were returned to the counter. And instantly Sunny's face became unusually serious.

"Say," he cried, with a hard look in his good-natured eyes. "D'you ever feel real mad about things? So mad, I mean, you want to get right out an' hurt somebody or somethin'? So mad, folks is likely to git busy an' string you up with a rawhide? I'm sure mostly dead easy as a man, but I feel that away jest about now. I've sed to myself I'd do best settin' my head in your wash-trough. I've said it more'n oncet in the last half-hour. But I don't guess it's any sort o' use. So—so, I'll cut out the wash-trough."

"You most generally do," said Toby pleasantly.

"You ain't comic—'cep' when you're feedin'," retorted Sunny, nettled. Then he turned to Minky, just as the doorway of the store was darkened by the advent of Sandy

Joyce. But he glanced back in the newcomer's direction and nodded. Then he went on immediately with his talk.

"Say, have you seen him?" he demanded of anybody. "I'm talkin' o' Zip," he added, for Sandy's enlightenment. "He found James. Located his ranch, an'—an' nigh got hammered to death for his pains. Gee!"

"We see him," said Minky, after an awed pause. "But he never said a word. He jest set Bill's mare back in the barn, an' bo't bacon, and hit off to hum."

"I didn't see him," Sandy admitted. "How was he?"

"Battered nigh to death, I said," cried Sunny, with startling violence. "His eyes are blackened, an' his pore mean face is cut about, an' bruised ter'ble. His clothes is torn nigh to rags, an'——"

"Was it the James outfit did it?" inquired Minky incredulously.

"They did that surely," cried Sunny vehemently. "You ain't seen Bill, have you? He's that mad you can't git a word out o' him. I tell you right here somethin's goin' to happen. Somethin's got to happen," he added, with a fresh burst of rage. "That gang needs cleanin' out. They need shootin' up like vermin, an'——"

"You're goin' to do it?" inquired Sandy sarcastically.

Sunny turned on him in a flash.

"I'll take my share in it," he cried, "an' it'll need to be a big share to satisfy me," he added, with such evident sincerity and fiery determination that his companions stared at him in wonder.

"Guess Sunny's had his rest broke," observed Toby, with a grin.

"I have that sure. An'—an' it makes me mad to git busy," the loafer declared. "Have you seen that pore feller with his face all mussed? Gee! Say, Zip wouldn't hurt a louse; he's that gentle-natured I'd say if ther' was only a baulky mule between him an' starvation he'd hate to live. He ain't no more savvee than a fool cat motherin' a china dog, but he's got the grit o' ten men. He's hunted out James with no more thought than he'd use firin' a cracker on the 4th o' July. He goes after him to claim his right, as calm an' foolish as a sheep in a butcherin' yard. An' I'd say right here ther' ain't one of us in this store would

have had the grit chasin' for his wife wher' Zip's bin chasin'——"

"Not for a wife, sure," interjected Sandy.

Toby smothered a laugh, but became serious under Sunny's contemptuous eye.

"That's like you, Sandy," he cried. "It's sure like you. But I tell you Zip's a man, an' a great big man to the marrer of his small backbone. His luck's rotten. Rotten every ways. He's stuck on his wife, an' she's gone off with a tough like James. He works so he comes nigh shamin' even me, who hates work, on a claim that couldn't show the colour o' gold on it, if ther' wa'an't nothin' to the earth but gold. He's jest got two notions in his silly head. It's his kids an' his wife. Mackinaw! It makes me sick. It does sure. Here's us fellers without a care to our souls, while that pore sucker's jest strugglin' an' strugglin' an' everythin's wrong with him—wrong as—oh, hell!"

For once Sandy forgot his malicious jibe at the loafer's expense. And Toby, too, forgot his pleasantry. Sunny's outburst of feeling had struck home, and each man stood staring thoughtfully at the mental picture he had conjured for them. Each admitted to himself in his own way the pity the other's words had stirred, but none of them had anything to add at the moment.

Sunny glanced from one to the other. His look was half questioning and wholly angry. He glanced across at the window and thrust his hands in his ragged trousers pockets.

And presently as he began to tap the floor with his foot a fresh rush of fiery anger was mounting to his head. He opened his lips as though about to continue his tirade, but apparently changed his mind. And, instead, he drew a dollar bill from his pocket, and flung it on the counter.

"Three more drinks," he demanded roughly.

Minky in unfeigned surprise produced the glasses. Sandy leant over, and, with face thrust forward, inspected the bill. Toby contented himself with a low whistle of astonishment.

Sunny glared at them contemptuously.

"Yes," he said roughly, "I've earned it. I've worked for it, do you understand? Wild Bill set me to look after Zip's kids, an' he's paid me for it. But—but that money

burns—burns like hell, an' I want to be quit of it. Oh, I ain't bug on no sort o' charity racket, I'm jest about as soft as my back teeth. But I'm mad—mad to git busy doin' anythin' so we ken git Zip level with that low-down skunk, James. An' if ther's fi' cents' worth o' grit in you, Mister Sandy Joyce, an' an atom o' savvee in your fool brain, Toby, you'll take a hand in the game."

Minky looked on in silent approval. Anything directed against James was bound to meet with his approval just now. But Sandy cleared his throat, and lounged with his back against the counter.

"An' wot, I'd ast, is goin' to hurt this tough?" he inquired, with a dash of his usual sarcasm.

Sunny flew at his drink and gulped it down.

"How do I know?" he cried scornfully.

"Jest so."

Toby grinned.

"You're a bright one, Sunny. You're so bright, you dazzle my eyes," he cried.

But Sunny was absorbed in a thought that was hazily hovering in the back of his brain, and let the insult pass.

"How ken I tell jest wot we're goin' to do," he cried. "Wot we want to do is to kind o' help that pore crittur Zip out first. Ther' he is wi' two kids to see to, which is sure more than one man's work, an' at the same time he's got to dig up that mudbank claim of his. He don't see the things impossible, 'cos he's that big in mind he can't see small things like that. But I ain't big that aways, an' I ken see. If he goes on diggin' wot's his kids goin' to do, an' if he don't dig wot's they goin' to do anyways. We'll hev to form a committee——"

"Sort o' trust," grinned Toby.

But Sunny passed over his levity and seized upon his suggestion.

"I 'lows your fool head's tho't somethin' wiser than it guessed," he said. "That's just wot we need. Ther' should be a trust to see after him. An' after it's got his kids fixed right——"

Sunny broke off as the tall figure of Wild Bill threw its shadow across the window of the store. The next moment the man himself entered the room.

He nodded silently, and was about to fling himself into one of the chairs, when Toby, in jocular anticipation, threw Sunny's proposition at him.

"Say, Sunny's woke up an' bin thinkin'," he cried. "I allow his brain is shockin' wonderful. Guess he's got sick o' restin' an' reckons he got a notion for makin' a trust lay-out."

"The Zip Trust," added Sandy, with a laugh, in which Toby joined heartily.

"Yes. He guesses Zip needs lookin' after," declared the remittance man in the midst of his mirth, glancing round for appreciation of the joke.

But the encouragement he received fell short of his expectations, and his laugh died out quite abruptly. There was no responsive smile on Minky's face. Sunny was glowering sulkily; while Bill's fierce brows were drawn together in an angry frown, and his gimlet eyes seemed to bore their way into the speaker's face.

"Wal?" he demanded coldly.

"Wal, I think he's——"

But Bill cut him short in his coldest manner.

"Do you?" he observed icily. "Wal, I'd say you best think ag'in. An' when you done thinkin' jest start right over ag'in. An' mebbe some day you'll get wise—if you don't get took meanwhiles."

Bill flung himself into the chair and crossed his long legs.

"Sunny's on the right lay," he went on. "Ther' ain't many men on Sufferin' Creek, but Zip's one of 'em. Say, Toby, would you ride out to James' outfit to call him all you think of the feller whose stole your wife?"

"Not by a sight," replied Toby seriously.

"Wal, Zip did. He's big," went on Bill in cold, harsh tones. Then he paused in thought. But he went on almost immediately. "We got to help him. I'm sure with Sunny." He turned on the loafer with a wintry smile. "You best organize right away, an'—count me in."

Sunny's eyes glowed with triumph. He had feared the man's ridicule. He had expected to see his lean shoulders go up in silent contempt. And then, he knew, would have followed a storm of sarcasm and "jollying" from Sandy and the other. With quick wit he seized his opportunity,

bent on using Bill's influence to its utmost. He turned on Minky with a well calculated abruptness.

"You'll help this thing out—too?" he challenged him.

And he got his answer on the instant—

"I sure will—to any extent."

Sandy and Toby looked at the storekeeper in some doubt. Bill was watching them with a curious intentness. And before Sunny could challenge the two scoffers, his harsh voice filled the room again.

"I don't know we'll need any more," he said, abruptly turning his gaze upon the open window, "otherwise we'd likely hev ast you two fellers. Y'see, we'll ned folks as ken do things——"

"Wot sort o' things?" demanded Sandy, with a sudden interest.

"Wal, that ain't easy to say right now, but——"

"I ain't much seein' to kids," cried Sandy, "but I ken do most anythin' else."

A flicker of a smile crept into Bill's averted eyes, while Sunny grinned broadly to see the way the man was now literally falling over himself to follow the leadership of Wild Bill.

"Wal, it ain't no use in saying things yet, but if you're dead set on joining this Zip Trust, I guess you can. But get this, what you're called upon to do you'll need to do good an' hard, an'—without argument."

Sandy nodded.

"I'm in," he cried, as though a great privilege had been bestowed upon him.

And at once Toby became anxious.

"Guess you ain't no use for me, Bill?" he hazarded, almost diffidently.

Bill turned his steely eyes on him in cold contemplation. Minky had joined in Sunny's grin at the other men's expense. Sandy, too, now that he was accepted as an active member of the trust, was indulging in a superior smile.

"I don't allow I have," Bill said slowly. "Y'see, you ain't much else than a 'remittance' man, an' they ain't no sort o' trash anyway."

"But," protested Toby, "I can't help it if my folks hand me money?"

"Mebbe you can't." Bill was actually smiling. And this fact so far influenced the other members of the trust that an audible titter went round the room. Then the gambler suddenly sat forward, and the old fierce gleam shone once more in his cold eyes. "Say," he cried suddenly. "If a feller got the 'drop' on you with six bar'ls of a gun well loaded, an'—guessed you'd best squeal, wot 'ud you do?"

"Squeal," responded the puzzled Toby, with alacrity.

"You ken join the Trust. You sure got more savvee than I tho't."

Bill sat back grinning, while a roar of laughter concluded the founding of the Zip Trust.

But like all ceremonials, the matter had to be prolonged and surrounded with the frills of officialdom. Sunny called it organization, and herein only copied people of greater degree and self-importance. He plunged into his task with whole-hearted enthusiasm, and, with every word he uttered, preened himself in the belief that he was rapidly ascending in the opinion of Wild Bill, the only man on Suffering Creek for whose opinion he cared a jot.

He explained to his comrades, with all the vanity of a man whose inspiration has met with public approval, that in forming such a combine as theirs, it would be necessary to allot certain work, which he called "departments," to certain individuals. He assured his fellow-members that such was always done in "way-up concerns." It saved confusion, and ensured the work being adequately performed.

"Sort o' like a noo elected gover'ment," suggested Sandy sapiently.

"Wal, I won't say that," said Sunny. "Them fellers traipse around wi' portyfolios hangin' to 'em. I don't guess we need them things. It's too hot doin' stunts like that."

"Portfolios?" questioned Toby artlessly. "Wot's them for?"

"Oh, jest nuthin' o' consequence. Guess it's to make folks guess they're doin' a heap o' work. No, what we need is to set each man his work this aways. Now Bill here needs to be president sure. Y'see, we must hev a 'pres.' Most everything needs a 'pres.' He's got to sit on top, so if any one o' the members gits gay he ken hand 'em a daisy wot'll send 'em squealin' an' huntin' their holes like

gophers. Wal, Bill needs to be our 'pres.' Then there's the 'general manager.' He's the feller wot sets around an' blames most everybody fer everything anyway, an' writes to the noospapers. He's got to have savvee, an' an elegant way o' shiftin' the responsibility o' things on them as can't git back at him. He's got to be a bright lad——"

"That's Sunny, sure," exclaimed Toby. "He's a dandy at gettin' out o' things an' leaving others in. Say——"

"Here, half-a-tick," cried Joyce, with sudden inspiration. "Who's goin' to be 'fightin' editor'?"

"Gee, what a brain!" cried Sunny derisively. "Say, we ain't runnin' a mornin' noos sheet. This is a trust. Sandy, my boy, you need educatin'. A trust's a corporation of folks wot is so crooked, they got to git together, an' pool their cash, so's to git enough dollars to kep 'em out o' penitentiary. That's how they start. Later on, if they kep clear o' the penitentiary, they start in to fake the market till the Gover'ment butts in. Then they git gay, buy up a vote in Congress, an' fake the laws so they're fixed right fer themselves. After that some of them git religion, some of 'em give trick feeds to their friends, some of 'em start in to hang jewels on stage females. Some of 'em have been known to shoot theirselves or git divorced. It ain't no sort o' matter wot they do, pervided they're civil to the noospaper folk. That's a trust, Sandy, an' I don't say but what the feller as tho't o' that name must o' bin a tarnation amusin' feller."

"Say, you orter bin in a cirkis," sneered Sandy, as the loafer finished his disquisition.

"Wal, I'd say that's better'n a museum," retorted Sunny.

But Toby was impatient to hear how Sunny intended to dispose of him.

"Wher' do I figger in this lay-out?" he demanded.

"You?" Sunny's eyes twinkled. "Don't guess we'll need to give you hard work. You best be boss o' the workin' staff."

"But ther' ain't no workin' staff," protested Toby.

"Jest so. That's why you'll be boss of it." Then Sunny turned to Sandy.

"We'll need your experience as a married man, tho'," he said slyly. "So you best be head o' the advisory board. You'll need to kep us wise to the general principles of

vittlin' a family of three, when the woman's missin'. Then we'll need a treasurer." Sunny turned to Minky, and his twinkling eyes asked the question.

"Sure," said Minky promptly, "I'll be treasurer. Seems to me I'll be safer that ways."

"Good," cried Sunny, "that's all fixed." He turned to Bill. "Say, pres," he went on, "I'd like to pass a vote o' thanks fer the way you conducted this yer meetin', an' put it to the vote, that we accept the treasurer's invitation to take wine. All in favour will——"

"Mine's rye," cried Sandy promptly.

"An' mine," added Toby.

"Rye for me," nodded Sunny at Minky's grinning face. "Bill——?"

But Bill shook his head.

"Too early for me," he said, "you fellers can git all you need into you though. But see here, folks," he went on, with a quietness of purpose that promptly reduced every eye to seriousness. "This ain't no play game as Sunny may ha' made you think. It's a proposition that needs to go thro', an'—I'm goin' to see it thro'. Zip's kids is our first trouble. They ain't easy handlin'. They got to be bro't up reg'lar, an' their stummicks ain't to be pizened with no wrong sort o' vittles. Ther's such a heap o' things to kids o' that age it makes me nigh sweat at the tho't. Howsum, Zip's down an' out, an' we got to see him right someways. As 'pres' of this lay-out, I tell you right here, every mother's son of us had best git out an' learn all we ken about fixin' kids right. How to feed 'em, how to set their pretties on right, how to clean 'em, how to—well, jest how to raise 'em. If any o' you got leddy friends I'd say git busy askin' 'em. So——"

At that moment the sound of footsteps on the veranda came in through the window, and Bill looked round. The next instant he spoke more rapidly, and with greater authority.

"Git goin'," he cried, "an' we'll meet after supper."

There was no doubt of this man's rule. Without a word the men filed out of the store, each one with his thoughts bent upon the possibilities of acquiring the knowledge necessary.

CHAPTER XI

STRANGERS IN SUFFERING CREEK

BILL watched the men depart. The stolid Minky, too, followed them with his eyes. But as they disappeared through the doorway he turned to the gambler, and, in surprise, discovered that he was reclining in a chair, stretched out in an attitude of repose, with his shrewd eyes tightly closed. He was about to speak when the swing-doors opened, and two strangers strolled in.

Minky greeted them, "Howdy?" and received an amiable response. The newcomers were ordinary enough to satisfy even the suspicious storekeeper. In fact, they looked like men from some city, who had possibly come to Suffering Creek with the purpose of ascertaining the possibilities of the camp as a place in which to try their fortunes. Both were clad in store clothes of fair quality, wearing hats of the black prairie type, and only the extreme tanning of their somewhat genial faces belied the city theory.

Minky noted all these things while he served them the drinks they called for, and, in the most approvedly casual manner, put the usual question to them.

"Wher' you from?" he inquired, as though the matter were not of the least consequence.

He was told Spawn City without hesitation, and in response to his remark that they had "come quite a piece," they equally amiably assured him that they had.

Then one of the men addressed his companion.

"Say, Joe," he said, "mebbe this guy ken put us wise to things."

And Joe nodded and turned to the storekeeper.

"Say, boss," he began, "we've heerd tell this lay-out is a dead gut bonanza. There's folks in Spawn City says

ther's gold enough here to drown the United States Treasury department. Guess we come along to gather some." He grinned in an ingratiating manner.

Minky thought before answering.

"Ther' sure is a heap o' gold around. But it ain't easy. I don't guess you'd gather much in a shovel. You'll get pay dirt that aways, but——"

"Ah! Needs cap'tal," suggested Joe.

"That's jest how we figgered," put in the other quietly.

Minky nodded. Many things were travelling swiftly through his mind.

"Drove in?" he inquired.

"Sure," replied Joe. "Unhooked down the trail a piece."

Bill's eyes opened and closed again. Then he shifted noisily in his chair. The men turned round and eyed him with interest. Then the man called Joe called back to the storekeeper.

"My name's Joe Manton," he said, by way of introduction. "An' my friend's called Sim Longley. Say," he went on, with a backward jerk of the head, "mebbe your friend 'll take something?"

Minky glanced over at Wild Bill. The gambler drowsily opened his eyes and bestirred himself.

"I sure will," he said, rearing his great length up, and moving across to the counter. "I'll take Rye, mister, an' thank you. This is Mr. Minky, gents. My name's Bill."

The introduction acknowledged, talk flowed freely. Wild Bill, in carefully toned down manner, engaged the strangers in polite talk, answering their questions about the gold prospects of the place, which were often pointed, in the most genial and even loquacious manner. He told them a great deal of the history of the place, warned them that Suffering Creek was not the sinecure the outside world had been told, endorsed Minky's story that what Suffering Creek really needed was capital to reach the true wealth of the place And, in the course of the talk, drink flowed freely.

Bill was always supplied with his drink from a different bottle to that out of which the strangers were served. As a matter of fact, he was probably the most temperate man on Suffering Creek, and, by an arrangement with Minky,

so as not to spoil trade, drank from a bottle of coloured water when the necessity for refreshment arose. But just now his manner suggested that he had drunk quite as much whisky as the strangers. His spirits rose with theirs, and his jocularity and levity matched theirs, step by step, as they went on talking.

The man Longley had spoken of the settlement as being "one-horsed," and Bill promptly agreed.

"It sure is," he cried. "We ain't got nothing but this yer canteen, with ol' Minky doin' his best to pizen us. Still, we get along in a ways. Mebbe we could do wi' a dancin'-hall—if we had females around. Then I'd say a bank would be an elegant addition to things. Y'see, we hev to ship our gold outside. Leastways, that's wot we used to do, I've heard. Y'see, I ain't in the minin' business," he added, by way of accounting for his lack of personal knowledge.

"Ah!" said Joe. "Maybe you're 'commercial'?"

Bill laughed so genially that the others joined in it.

"In a ways, mebbe I am. You see, I mostly sit around, an' when anything promisin' comes along, why, I ain't above plankin' a few dollars by way of—speculation."

Joe grinned broadly.

"A few shares in a poker hand, eh?" he suggested shrewdly.

"You're kind o' quick, mister," Bill laughed. "I'm stuck on 'draw' some."

Then the talk drifted suddenly. It was Longley who presently harked back to the commercial side of Suffering Creek.

"You was sayin' ther' wasn't no bank on Suffering Creek," he said interestedly. "What do folks do with their dust now, then?"

A quick but almost imperceptible glance passed between Bill and the storekeeper. And Bill's answer came at once.

"Wal, as I sed, we used to pass it out by stage. But——"

Longley caught him up just a shade too quickly.

"Yes—but?"

"Wal," drawled Bill thoughtfully, "y'see, we ain't shipped dust out for some time on account of a gang that's

settin' around waitin'. You comin' from Spawn City 'll likely have heard of this feller James an' his gang. A most ter'ble tough is James. I'll allow he's got us mighty nigh wher' he wants us—scairt to death. No, we ain't sent out no gold stage lately, but we're goin' to right soon. We'll hev to. We've ast for an escort o' Gover'ment troops, but I guess Sufferin' Creek ain't on the map. The Gover'ment don't guess they've any call to worry."

"Then what you goin' to do?" inquired Longley, profoundly interested.

"Can't say. The stage'll hev to take its chances."

"An' when——" began Longley. But his comrade cut him short.

"Say, I'll allow the gold racket's mighty int'restin', but it makes me tired this weather. You was speakin' 'draw'——"

"Sure," responded Bill amiably. "We're four here, if you fancy a hand. Minky?"

The storekeeper nodded, and promptly produced cards and 'chips.' And in five minutes the game was in progress. Used as he was to the vagaries of his gambling friend, Minky was puzzled at the way he was discussing Suffering Creek with these strangers. His talk about James and the gold-stage was too rankly absurd for anything, and yet he knew that some subtle purpose must be underlying his talk. However, it was no time to question or contradict now, so he accepted the situation and his share in the game.

And here again astonishment awaited him. Bill lost steadily, if not heavily. He watched the men closely, but could discover none of the known tricks common to the game when sharps are at work. They not only seemed to be playing straight, but badly. They were not good poker players. Yet they got the hands and won. For himself, he kept fairly level. It was only Bill who lost.

And all through the game the gambler allowed himself to be drawn into talking of Suffering Creek by the interested Longley, until it would have been obvious to the veriest greenhorn that the stranger was pumping him.

The newcomers seemed to be enjoying themselves enormously, and the greatest good-will prevailed. Nor was it

until nearly supper-time that Bill suddenly stood up and declared he had had enough. He was a loser to the extent of nearly a hundred dollars.

So the party broke up. And at Minky's suggestion the men departed to put their horses in the barn, while they partook of supper under his roof. It was the moment they had gone that the storekeeper turned on his friend.

"Say, I ain't got you, Bill. Wot's your game?" he demanded, with some asperity.

But the gambler was quite undisturbed by his annoyance. He only chuckled.

"Say," he countered, "ever heerd tell of Swanny Long, the biggest tough in Idaho?"

"Sure. But——"

"That's him—that feller Sim Longley."

The storekeeper stared.

"You sure?"

"Sure? Gee! I was after him fer nigh three—— Say," he broke off—it was not his way to indulge in reminiscence —"I guess he's workin' with James." Then he laughed. "Gee! I allow he was rigged elegant—most like some Bible-smashin' sky-pilot."

Minky was still labouring hard to understand.

"But all that yarn of the gold-stage?" he said sharply.

"That?" Bill at once became serious. "Wal, that's pretty near right. You ain't yearnin' fer that gang to come snoopin' around Suffering Creek. So I'm guessin' we'll hev to pass a gold-stage out o' her some time."

"You're mad," cried Minky in consternation.

"That's as may be," retorted Bill, quite unruffled. "Anyways, I guess I spent a hundred dollars in a mighty good deal this day—if it was rotten bad poker."

And he turned away to talk to Slade of Kentucky, who entered the store at that moment with his friend O'Brien.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOMAN

THE woman turned from the window at the sound of footsteps somewhere behind her. That was her way now. She started at each fresh sound that suggested any one approaching. Her nerves were on edge for some reason she could never have put into words. She did not fear, yet a curious nervousness was hers which made her listen acutely at every footstep, and breathe her relief if the sound died away without further intrusion upon her privacy.

Presently she turned back to the window with just such relief. The footstep had passed. She drew her feet up into the ample seat of the rocking-chair, and, with her elbow resting upon its arm, heavily pressed her chin into the palm of her hand, and again stared at the rampart of mountains beyond.

Nor had all the beauties spread out before her yearning gaze the least appeal for her. How should they? Her thoughts were roaming in a world of her own, and her eyes were occupied in gazing upon her woman's pictures as she saw them in her mind. The wonders of that scene of natural splendour laid out before her had no power to penetrate the armour of her preoccupation. All her mind and heart were stirred and torn by emotions such as only a woman can understand, only a woman can feel. The ancient battle of titanic forces, which had brought into existence that world of stupendous might upon which her unseeing eyes gazed, was as nothing, it seemed, to the passionate struggle going on in her torn heart. To her there was nothing beyond her own regretful misery, her own dread of the future, her passionate revulsion at thoughts of the past.

The truth was, she had not yet found the happiness she

had promised herself, that had been promised to her. She had left behind her all that life which, when it had been hers, she had hated. Her passionate nature had drawn her whither its stormy waves listed. And now that the tempest was passed, and the driving forces had ceased to urge, leaving her in a rock-bound pool of reflection, she saw the enormity of the step she had taken, she realized the strength of Nature's tendrils which still bound her no less surely.

The mild face of Scipio haunted her. She saw in her remorseful fancy his wondering blue eyes filled with the stricken look of a man powerless to resent, powerless to resist. She read into her thought the feelings of his simple heart which she had so wantonly crushed. For she knew his love as only a woman can. She had probed its depth and found it fathomless—fathomless in its devotion to herself. And now she had thrown him and his love, the great legitimate love of the father of her children, headlong out of her life.

A dozen times she bolstered her actions with the assurance that she did not want his love, that he was not the man she had ever cared for seriously, could ever care for. She told herself that the insignificance of his character, his personality, were beneath contempt. She desired a man of strength for her partner, a man who could make himself of some account in the world which was theirs.

No, she did not want Scipio. He was useless in the scheme of life, and she did not wish to have to "mother" her husband. Far rather would she be the slave of a man whose ruthless domination extended even to herself. And yet Scipio's mild eyes haunted her, and stirred something in her heart that maddened her, and robbed her of all satisfaction in the step she had taken.

But this was only a small part of the cause of her present mood. She had not at first had the vaguest understanding of the bonds which really fettered her, holding her fast to the life that had been hers for so long. Now she knew. And the knowledge brought with it its bitter cost. Some forewarning had been hers when she appealed to her lover for the possession of her children. But although her mother's instinct had been stirred to alarm at parting, she had not, at

that time, experienced the real horror of what she was doing in abandoning her children.

She was inconsolable now. With all her mind and heart she was crying out for the warm, moist pressure of infant lips. Her whole body yearned for those who were flesh of her flesh, for the gentle beating hearts to which her body had given life. They were hers—hers, and of her own action she had put them out of her life. They were hers, and she was maddened at the thought that she had left them to another. They were hers, and—yes, she must have them. Whatever happened, they must be restored to her. Life would be intolerable without them.

She was in a wholly unreasoning state of mind. All the mother in her was uppermost, craving, yearning, panting for her own. For the time, at least, all else was lost in an overwhelming regret, and such a power of love for her offspring, that she had no room for the man who had brought about the separation.

She was a selfish woman, and had always craved for the best that life could give her, but now that her mother-love was truly roused her selfishness knew no bounds. She had no thought for anybody, no consideration. She could have none until her desire was satisfied.

Her tortured heart grew angry against Scipio. She was driven to fury against James. What mattered it that her lover had so far fulfilled all his other promises to her, if he did not procure the children and return them to her arms? What mattered it that she was surrounded with luxury uncommon on the prairie, a luxury she had not known for so many years?

She had her own rooms, where no one intruded without her consent. The spacious house had been ransacked to make them all that she could desire. All the outlaw's associates were herded into the background, lest their presence should offend her. Even James himself had refrained from forcing his attentions upon her, lest, in the first rush of feeling at her breaking with the old life, they should be unwelcome. His patience and restraint were wonderful in a man of his peculiar savagery. And surely it pointed his love for her. Had it been simply the momentary passion of

an untamed nature, he would have waited for nothing, when once she had become his possession.

It was a curious anachronism that she should be the mistress of the situation with such a man as James. Yet so far she *was* mistress of the situation. The question was, how long would she remain so? It is possible that she had no understanding of this at first. It is possible that she would have resented such a question, had it occurred to her when she first consented to break away from her old life.

But now it was different. Now that she began to understand all she had flung away for this man, when the mother in her was at last fully aroused, and all her wits were driven headlong to discover a way by which to satisfy her all-consuming desire for her children, now the native cunning of the woman asserted itself. She saw in one revealing flash her position, she saw where lay her power at the moment, and she clung to it desperately, determined to play the man while she could to gain her ends.

Thus it was she was nervous, apprehensive, every time she thought it likely that her lover was about to visit her. She dreaded what might transpire. She dreaded lest her power should be weakened before she had accomplished her end. It was difficult; it was nerve-racking. She must keep his love at fever-heat. It was her one chance.

Again she started. It was the sound of a fresh footstep beyond the door. She glanced at the door with half-startled eyes and sat listening. Then her lips closed decidedly and a look of purpose crept into her eyes. A moment later she stood up. She was pale, but full of purpose.

"Is that you, Jim?" she called.

"Sure," came the ready response.

The next instant the door was flung open and the man came in.

His bronzed face was smiling, and the savage in him was hidden deep down out of sight. His handsome face was good to look upon, and as the woman's eyes surveyed his carefully clad slim figure she felt a thrill of triumph at the thought that he was hers at the raising of her finger.

But she faced him without any responsive smile. She had summoned him with a very definite purpose in her mind.

and no display of anything that could be interpreted into weakness must be made.

"I want to talk to you," she said, pointing at the rocking-chair she had just vacated.

James glanced at the chair. Then his eyes turned back to her with a question in them. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and flung himself into the seat, and stretched out his long legs luxuriously.

Apparently Jessie had not noticed the shrug. It would have been better had she done so. She might then have understood more fully the man she was dealing with. However, she turned to the window and spoke with her back to him.

"It's about—things," she said a little lamely.

The man's smile was something ironical, as his eyes greedily devoured the beauty of her figure.

"I'm glad," he said in a non-committing way. Then, as no reply was immediately forthcoming, "Get going."

But Jessie made no answer. She was thinking hard, and somehow her thoughts had an uneasy confusion in them. She was trying hard to find the best way to begin that which she had to say, but every opening seemed inadequate. She must not appeal, she must not dictate. She must adopt some middle course. These things she felt instinctively.

The man shifted his position and glanced round the room.

"Kind of snug here," he said presently, running his eyes appreciatively over the simple decorations, the cheap bric-à-brac which lined the walls and, in a world where all decoration was chiefly conspicuous by its absence, gave to the place a suggestion of richness. The red pine walls looked warm, and the carpeted floor was so unusual as to give one a feeling of extraordinary refinement. Then, too, the chairs, scattered about, spoke of a strain after civilized luxury. The whole ranch-house had been turned inside out to make Jessie's quarters all she could desire them.

"Yes," he muttered, "it's sure snug." Then his eyes came back to the woman. "Maybe ther's something I've forgotten. Guess you've just got to fix a name to it."

Jessie turned instantly. Her beautiful eyes were shining

with a sudden hope, but her face was pale with a hardly controlled emotion.

"That's easy," she said. "I want my children. I want little Vada. I—I must have her. You promised I should. If you hadn't, I should never have left. I must have her." She spoke breathlessly, and broke off with a sort of nervous jolt.

In the pause that followed James' expression underwent a subtle change. It was not that there was any definite movement of a single muscle. His smile remained, but, somehow, through it peeped a hard look which had not been there before.

"So you want—the kids," he said at last, and a curious metallic quality was in his voice. "Say," he added thoughtfully, "you women are queer ones."

"Maybe we are," retorted Jessie. She tried to laugh as she spoke, but it was a dismal failure. Then she hurried on. "Yes," she cried a little shrilly, "it was part of our bargain, and—so far you have not carried it out."

"Bargain?" The man's brows went up.

"Yes, bargain."

"I don't remember a—bargain." James' eyes had in them an ominous glitter.

"Then you've got a bad memory."

"I sure haven't, Jess. I sure haven't that. I generally remember good. And what I remember now is that I promised you those kids if you needed them. I swore that you should have 'em. But I made no bargain. Guess women don't see things dead right. This is the first time you've spoken to me of this, and you say I haven't fulfilled my bargain. When I refuse to give you them kiddies, it's time to take that tone. You want them kids. Well—go on."

The change in her lover's manner warned Jessie that danger lay ahead. In the brief time she had spent under his roof she had already learned that, as yet, she had only seen the gentlest side of the man, and that the other side was always perilously near the surface.

In the beginning this had been rather a delight to her to think that she, of all people, was privileged to bask in the sunny side of a man who habitually displayed the storm

clouds of his fiercer side to the world in general. But since that time a change, which she neither knew nor understood, had come over her, and, instead of rejoicing that he possessed that harsher nature, she rather feared it, feared that it might be turned upon her.

It was this change that had helped to bring her woman's cunning into play. It was this change which had brought her her haunting visions of the old life. It was this change which had prompted her that she must keep her lover at arm's length—as yet. It was this change, had she paused to analyze it, which might have told her of the hideous mistake she had made. That the passion which she had believed to be an absorbing love for the man was merely a passion, a base human passion, inspired in a weak, discontented woman. But as yet she understood nothing of this. The glamour of the man's personality still had power to sway her, and she acknowledged it in her next words.

"Don't be angry, Jim dear," she said, with a smile of seductive sweetness which had immediate effect upon the man. "You don't understand us women. We're sure unreasonable where our love is concerned."

Then a flush spread itself slowly over her handsome face, and passion lit her eyes.

"But I must have my children," she broke out suddenly. "One of them, anyhow—little Vada. You—you can't understand all it means to be away from them. They are mine. They are part of me. I—I feel I could kill any one who keeps them from me. You promised, Jim, you sure did. Get her for me. My little girl—my little Vada."

The man had risen from his chair and moved to the window. He sat on the rough sill facing her. His eyes were hot with passion, too, but it was passion of a very different sort.

"And if I do?" he questioned subtly.

"If you do?" Jessie's eyes widened with a world of cunning simplicity.

"Yes, if I do?" The man's face was nearer.

"You'll have fulfilled your promise."

Jessie had turned again to the window, and her eyes were cold.

The man's brows drew together sharply, and his dark eyes watched the perfect outline of her oval cheek. Then he drew a sharp breath, and biting words leapt to his lips. But he held them back with a sudden grip that was perilously near breaking. Jessie's power was still enormous with him. But this very power was maddening to a man of his nature, and the two must not come into too frequent conflict.

He suddenly laughed, and the woman turned in alarm at the note that sounded in it.

"Yes," he said tensely, "I'll fulfil my promise. It'll amuse me, sure, getting back at that Sufferin' Creek lay-out. I owe them something for keepin' back the gold-stages. You shall have Vada, sure."

He broke off for an instant and drew nearer. He leant forward, and one arm reached out to encircle her waist. But with an almost imperceptible movement the woman stood beyond his reach.

"And—and after?" he questioned, his arm still outstretched to embrace her.

The woman made no answer.

"And after?"

There was a hot glow in his tone. He waited. Then he went on.

"Then I'll have done everything," he said—"all that a man can do to make you happy. I'll have fulfilled all my promises. I'll—— And you?" he went on, coming close up to her.

This time she did not repulse him. Instinct told her that she must not. Before all things she wanted Vada. So his arms closed about her, and a shower of hot, passionate kisses fell upon her face, her hair, her lips.

At last she pushed him gently away. For the moment all the old passion had been stirred, but now, as she released herself, an odd shiver passed through her body, and a great relief came to her as she stood out of his reach. It was the first real, definite feeling of repulsion she had had, and as she realized it a sudden fear gripped her heart, and she longed to rush from his presence. But, even so, she did not fully understand the change that was taking place in her. Her predominating thought was for the possession of little

Vada, and she urged him with all the intensity of her longing.

"You'll get her for me?" she cried, with an excitement that transfigured her. "You will. Oh, Jim, I can never thank you sufficiently. You are good to me. And when will you get her—now? Oh, Jim, don't wait. You must do it now. I want her so badly. I wonder how you'll do it. Will you take her? Or will you ask Zip for her? I—I believe he would give her up. He's such a queer fellow. I believe he'd do anything I asked him. I sure do. How are you going to get her?"

The man was watching her with all the fire of his love in his eyes. It was a greedy, devouring gaze of which Jessie must have been aware had she only been thinking less of her child. Nor did he answer at once. Then slowly the passionate light died out of his eyes, and they became thoughtful.

"Tell me," the woman urged him.

Suddenly he looked into her face with a cruel grin.

"Sit down, Jess," he said sharply, "and write a letter to Zip asking him, in your best lingo, to let you have your kid. An' when you done that I'll see he gets it, an'—I'll see you get the kid. But make the letter good an' hot. Pile up the agony biz. I'll fix the rest."

For a moment the woman looked into his face, now lit with such a cruel grin. Something in her heart gave her pause. Somehow she felt that what she was called upon to do was intended to hurt Zip in some subtle way, and the thought was not pleasant. She didn't want to hurt Zip. She tried in those few seconds to probe this man's purpose. But her mind was not equal to the task. Surely a letter appealing to Zip could not really hurt him. And she wanted little Vada so much. It was this last thought that decided her. No, nothing should stand in her way. She steeled her heart against her better feelings, but with some misgivings, and sat down to write.

James watched her. She procured paper and pen, and he watched her bending over the table. No detail of her face and figure escaped his greedy eyes. She was very beautiful, so beautiful to him that he stirred restlessly, chafing irritably under the restraint he was putting upon himself. Again and

again he asked himself why he was fool enough to do as he was doing. She was his. There was no one to stop him, no one but—her.

Ah! There was the trouble. Such was the man's temper that nothing could satisfy him that gave him no difficulty of attaining. His was the appetite of an epicure in all things. Everything in its way must be of the best, and to be of the best to him it must be the most difficult of achievement.

He waited with what patience he could until the letter was written. Then he watched Jessie seal and address it. Then she rose and stood staring down at the cruel missive. She knew it was cruel now, for, trading on the knowledge of the man who was to receive it, she had appealed through the channel of her woman's weakness to all that great spirit which she knew to abide in her little husband's heart.

James understood something of what was passing in her mind. And it pleased him to think of what he had forced her to do—pleased him as cruelty ever pleases the truly vicious.

At last she held the missive out to him.

"There it is," she said. And as his hand closed upon it her own was drawn sharply away, as though to avoid contact with his.

"Good," he said, with a peculiar grin.

For a moment the silence remained unbroken. Then the woman raised appealing eyes to his face.

"You won't hurt Zip?" she said in a voice that would surely have heartened the object of her solicitude had he heard it.

The man shook his head. His jaws were set, and his smile was unpleasing.

"Guess any hurtin' Zip gets 'll be done by you."

"Ah, no, no!"

The woman reached out wildly for the letter, but James had passed swiftly out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII

BIRDIE AND THE BOYS

THE derelicts of a mining camp must ever be interesting to the student of human nature, so wide is the field for study. But it were better to be a student, simply, when probing amongst the refuse heaps of life's débris. A sentimentalist, a man of heart, would quickly have it broken with the pity of it all. A city's tragedies often require search to reveal them, but upon the frontier tragedy stalks unsepulchred in the background of nearly every life, ready to leap out in all its naked horror and settle itself leech-like upon the sympathetic heart, stifling it with the burden of its misery.

No, it is not good to delve into the dark pages of such folks' lives too closely, unless armoured with impenetrable callousness. But one cannot help wondering whence all those living tragedies come. Look at the men. For the most part strong, able creatures, apparently capable of fighting the lusty battle of life with undiminished ardour. Look at the women. They are for the most part thinking women, healthy, capable. And yet—well, nine-tenths of them are not so cut off from their home cities, their friends and relatives, without some more than ordinary reason.

It is a sad sight to see the women plunged headlong into the fight for existence in such places, to witness the cruel iron thrust upon them its searing brand, to watch all the natural softness of their sex harden to the necessary degree for a successful issue to the battle, to witness their frequent unsexing and ultimate degradation. Such results are common enough when a woman enters the lists. It is so often a mere question of time. And when the end is achieved, how awful, how revolting, but how natural.

How Birdie Mason came to find herself the one woman on Suffering Creek—leaving out the later advent of Scipio's wife—it is not for us to ask. Whatever her little tragedy it is hers alone, and does not concern us. All that we need think of is her future, and the pity that so well-favoured a woman has not found her lot cast in places where her womanhood has its best chances. However, she is there, living the life of all such hired "helps," drudging from morning till night in one long round of sordid labour, in an atmosphere stinking with the fetid breath of debased humanity.

But as yet the life has made no inroads upon her moral health. Her sunny good nature sets her singing over the most grinding labours. Her smiling face, and ready tongue, give her an air of happiness and joy of life which seems well-nigh invincible. And her popularity contrives her many thrilling moments and advantages which she is too much a woman and a child to deny herself.

Her day's work ends with the after supper "wash up," a dreary routine which might well crush the most ardent spirit. Yet she bends over her tubs full of crockery dreaming her sunny dreams, building her little castles to the clink of enamelled tin cups, weaving her romances to the clatter of cutlery, smiling upon the mentally conjured faces of her boys amidst the steaming odours of greasy, lukewarm water. The one blot upon her existence is perhaps the Chinese cook, with whom she has perforce to associate. She dislikes him for no other reason than that he is a "yaller-faced doper that ought to been set to herd with a menagerie of measly skunks." But even this annoyance cannot seriously damp her buoyancy, and, with wonderful feminine philosophy, she puts him out of her mind as a "no account feller, anyway."

She was putting the finishing touches to the long dining-table, making it ready for the next day's breakfast. It was not an elaborate preparation. She "dumped" a box of knives and forks at each end of it, and then proceeded to chase any odd bits of débris from the last meal on to the floor with a duster. Then, with a hand-broom and pan, she took these up and with them any other rubbish that might be lying about. Finally, she set jugs of drinking water at

intervals down the centre of the table, and her work was done.

She looked about her, patting her fair hair with that eminently feminine touch which is to be seen in every woman from the millionaire's wife down to the poorest emigrant. Then, with less delicacy, she lifted her apron and wiped the moisture from her round young face.

"Guess that's 'most everything," she murmured, her eyes brightening at the contemplation of her completed task. "I'll just cut out them——"

She went to a cupboard and drew out a parcel of white lawn and paper patterns, which she carefully spread out on the table. And, in a few moments, she was bending absorbedly over the stuff, lost in the intricacies of hewing out an embryonic garment for her personal adornment.

It was at this task that Toby Jenks found her. He was worried to death at the thought that, as a member of the newly formed Zip Trust, it was his duty to gather information concerning the management of children. However, in the midst of his trouble he hit on the brilliant idea of consulting the only woman of his acquaintance.

Toby wanted to do something startling in the interests of the Trust. He felt that his membership had been conferred in a rather grudging spirit. And, to his mildly resentful way of thinking, it seemed it would be a good thing if he could surprise his friends with the excellence of his services in the general interests of the concern.

Birdie heard the door open, and raised a pair of startled eyes at the intruder. It was not that such visits were out of order, or even uncommon, but they generally occurred after pre-arrangement, which gave her the opportunity of "fixing herself right."

With a wild grab she scrambled her material, and the pattern, so that its identification would be quite impossible to male eyes, and hugged it in her arms. Turning swiftly she thrust it into the cupboard, and slammed the door. But she had no resentment at the interruption. Toby was quite a new visitor, and, well—the more the merrier.

She turned to him all smiles, and Toby returned her welcome something sheepishly. He cut a quaint figure with

his broad, ungainly shoulders supporting his rather pumpkin face. Then his arms were a little too long and terminated in two "leg-of-mutton" hands.

"Evenin', Birdie," he said bashfully. "Guess you were sewin'?"

"Guess again," cried the girl readily, her eyes dancing at the contemplation of a few moments' badinage with a new candidate for her favours.

"Well, you wa'an't playin' the pianner."

But Birdie was quite equal to the best efforts of her candidates.

"My, but ain't you slick?" she cried, allowing her smiling gaze to remain looking straight into his face in a way she knew never failed to confuse her admirers on Suffering Creek. She watched till the sturdy man's eyes turned away, and knew that he was groping for an adequate retort. This effect was the result of practice with her, a practice she thoroughly enjoyed.

The "leg-of-mutton" hands fumbled their way into the tops of Toby's trousers, and, with a sudden self-assertion, which fitted him badly, he lurched over to the table, beyond which Birdie was standing. It was his intention to seat himself thereon, but his tormentor had not yet reached the point where she could allow such intimacy.

"Say, I ain't ast you to sit around," she said, with an alluring pout. "Men-folk don't sit around in a lady's parlour till they're ast. 'Sides, the table's fixed fer breakfast. And anyway it ain't for settin' on."

Toby moved away quickly, his attempt at ease deserting him with ludicrous suddenness. At sight of his blushing face Birdie relaxed her austerity.

"Say, ain't you soft?" she declared, with a demure lowering of her lids. "I've allus heerd say, you only got to tell a feller don't, an' he sure does it quick. Men-folk is that contrary. Now——"

The encouragement brought its reward. Toby promptly sat himself on the table and set it creaking.

"Well, I do declare!" cried Birdie, in pretended indignation. "And I never ast you, neither. I don't know, I'm sure. Some folks has nerve."

But this time Toby was not to be intimidated. Perhaps it was the girl's bright smile. Perhaps, with marvellous inspiration, he saw through her flirtatious methods. Anyway, he remained where he was, grinning sheepishly up into her face.

"Guess you best push me off. I ain't heavy," he dared her clumsily.

"I sure wouldn't demean myself that away," she retorted. "Gee, me settin' hands on a feller like you. It would need a prize-fighter."

The acknowledgment of his size and strength was a subtle tribute which pleased the man, as it was intended to. He preened himself and drew his knees up into his arms, in an attitude intended to be one of perfect ease and to show his confidence.

"I sure ain't much of a feller for strength," he said modestly, eyeing his enormous arms and hands affectionately. "You ought to see Wild Bill. He—he could eat me, an' never worry his digestion."

Birdie laughed happily. She was always ready to laugh at a man's attempt at humour. That was her way.

"You are a queer one," she said, seating herself on the opposite edge of the table, so that she was sufficiently adjacent, and at the requisite angle at which to carry on her flirtation satisfactorily. "Say," she went on, with a down drooping of her eyelids, "why ain't you in there playin' poker? Guess you're missin' heaps o' fun. I wish I was a 'boy.' I wouldn't miss such fun sitting around in here."

"Wouldn't you?" Toby grinned, while his brains struggled to find a happy reply. "Well, you see," he hazarded at last, "poker an' whisky ain't to be compared to talkin' to a dandy fine gal with yaller hair an' elegant blue eyes."

He passed one of his great hands across his forehead as though his attempt had made him perspire. But he had his reward. Birdie contrived a blush of pleasure, and edged a little nearer to him.

"Gee, you can talk pretty," she declared, her lips parted in an admiring smile. "It makes me kind o' wonder how you fellers learn it." Then she added demurely, "But I

ain't pretty, nor nothing like you fellers try to make out. I'm jest an ord'nary sort of girl."

"No you ain't," broke in Toby, feeling that his initial success had put him on the top of the situation, and that he had nothing now to fear. Besides, he really felt that Birdie was an uncommonly nice girl, and, in a vague way, wondered he had never noticed it before.

"That you ain't," he went on emphatically. Then he added as though to clinch his statement, "not by a sight."

This brought him to a sudden and uncomfortable stop. He knew he ought to go on piling up compliment on compliment to make good his point. But he had emptied his brain cells by his threefold denial, and now found himself groping in something which was little better than a vacuum. And in his trouble he found himself wishing he was gifted with Sunny's wit. Wild Bill's force would have carried him through, or even Sandy Joyce's overweening confidence would have kept his head above water. As it was he was stuck. Hopelessly, irretrievably at the end of his resources.

He perspired in reality now, and let his knees drop out of his arms. This movement was his salvation. With the relaxing of his physical effort the restraining grip upon his thinking powers gave way. Inspiration leapt, and he found himself talking again almost before he was aware of it.

"You're a real pretty gal, Birdie," he heard himself saying. "Now, maybe you got some kids?" he added, with an automatic grin of ingratiation.

How the inquiry slipped out he never knew. How it had been formulated in his brain remained a riddle that he was never able to solve. But there it was, plain and decided. There was no shirking it. It was out in all its naked crudeness.

There was a moment's pause which might have been hours, it seemed so horribly long to the waiting man. He became dimly aware of a sudden hardening in Birdie's eyes, a mounting flush to her cheeks and forehead, a sudden, astounding physical movement, and then the work-worn palm of her hand came into contact with his cheek with such force as to prove the value to her physical development of the strenuous labours which were hers.

He never thought a woman's hand could sting so much. He never thought that he could be made to feel so mean as this girl's sudden vehemence made him feel.

"How dare you, you bumming remittance feller?" she cried, with eyes blazing and bosom heaving. "How dare you—you—you——" And then she further punished him with that worst of all feminine punishments—she burst into tears.

The next few moments were never quite clear to the distracted and unthinking Toby. He never really knew what actually happened. He had a confused memory of saying things by way of apology, of making several pacific overtures, which met with physical rebuffs of no mean order, and tearful upbraidings which were so mixed up with choking sniffs as to be fortunately more or less unintelligible. Finally, when he came to his ordinary senses, and the dead level of his understanding was fully restored, he found himself grasping the girl firmly by the waist, her golden head lying snugly on his massive shoulder, and with a distinct recollection of warm ripe lips many times pressed upon his own. All of which was eminently pleasing.

When once these comfortable relations were thoroughly established, he had no difficulty in clearing the clouds from her horizon, and relegating her tears into the background. Her nature was of a much too smiling order to need a great deal of coaxing. But explanation was needed, and explanation never came easy to this stalwart dullard.

"Y'see, what I meant was," he said, with a troubled frown of intense concentration, "maybe you know about kids. I didn't mean offence, I sure didn't. Everybody knows our Birdie to be jest a straight, up-standin', proper gal, who wouldn't hurt nobody, nor nuthin', 'cep' it was a buzzin' fly around the supper hash. No feller don't take no account o' her bein' a pot-wallopin', hash-slingin' mutton rustler. It sure ain't no worse than ladlin' swill to prize hogs. It's jest in the way o' business. 'Sides, she don't need to care what no fellers thinks. She ain't stuck on men-folk wuth a cent."

"That I sure ain't," asserted a smothered voice from the bosom of his dirty shirt.

"That you ain't," he reassured her. "You're jest a

dandy gal as 'ud make any feller with a good patch o' pay dirt a real elegant sort o' wife."

The golden head snuggled closer into his shirt.

"You ain't got no patch o' pay dirt, Toby?" she inquired.

Toby shook his head all unsuspiciously.

"No sech luck," he asserted. Then with a sudden burst of gallantry, "If I had I don't guess there'd be no Birdie Mason chasin' around these parts unbespoke."

The girl's eyes developed an almost childish simplicity as they looked up into his foolish face.

"What d'you mean?"

"Mean? Why, jest nothin', only——"

Toby laughed uneasily. And a shadow crossed Birdie's face.

"I don't guess the patch o' pay dirt matters a heap," she said, with subtle encouragement.

"That's so," agreed Toby.

"Y'see, a gal don't marry a feller fer his patch o' pay dirt," she went on, doing her best.

"Sure she don't."

But Toby's enthusiasm was rapidly cooling. The girl breathed a sigh of perfect content. And her heavy breathing was fast making a moist patch amidst the gravel stains on his shirt front.

"She jest loves a feller——"

Toby's arm slipped from her waist, and a hunted look crept into his foolish eyes.

"An' she don't care nothin'——"

The man was suddenly seized with a racking fit of coughing, which somehow jolted the girl into an upright position.

"Course she don't," he agreed, when his paroxysm had passed. "Say, you don't think I got newmony?" he inquired, feeling the need for an abrupt change of subject. "I was allus weak-chested as a kid. An' talkin' o' kids," he hurried on, in his terror recalling the object of his visit, "guess you ken put me wise."

"Kids? I wasn't talkin' of kids," protested the girl a little angrily.

She was hurt. Cruelly hurt. All her best efforts had

gone for nothing. A moment before Toby had seemed so nearly hers, and now——

"No. I didn't guess you were. But—that is—you see——"

The man floundered heavily and broke off. His look was one of comical confusion and trouble. So much so that it was too much for the girl's good nature.

"Whose kids?" she demanded, the familiar smile creeping back into her eyes, and her lips pursing dryly. "Yours?"

"Oh, no," denied the man quickly. "Not mine. It's Zip's. Y'see, since his wife's lit out he's kind o' left with 'em. An' he's that fool-headed he don't know how to raise 'em proper. So I guessed I'd help him. Now, if you put me wise——"

"You help raise Zip's kids? Gee!" The girl slid off the table and stood eyeing him, her woman's humour tickled to the limit.

But Toby did not realize it. He was in deadly earnest now.

"Yes," he said simply. Then, with a gleam of intelligence, "How'd you raise 'em?"

The girl was suddenly stirred to a feeling of good-humoured malice.

"How'd I raise 'em? Why, it ain't jest easy."

"It sure ain't," agreed Toby heartily. "Now, how'd you feed 'em?"

Birdie became judicially wise.

"Well," she began, "you can't jest feed 'em same as ord'nary folks. They need speshul food. You'll need to give 'em boiled milk plain or with pap, you kin git fancy crackers an' soak 'em. Then ther's beef-tea. Not jest ord'nary beef-tea. You want to take a boilin' o' bones, an' boil for three hours, an' then skim well. After that you might let it cool some, an' then you add flavourin'. Not too much, an' not too little, jest so's to make it elegant tastin'. Then you cook toasties to go with it, or give 'em crackers. Serve it to 'em hot, an' jest set around blowin' it so it don't scald their little stummicks. Got that? You can give 'em eggs, but not too much meat. Meat well done an' cut up wi' vegetables an' gravy, an' make 'em eat it with

a spoon. Knives is apt to cut 'em. Eggs light boiled, an' don't let 'em rub the yolk in their hair, nor slop gravy over their bow-ties. Candy, some, but it ain't good for their teeth, which needs seein' to by a dentist, anyway. Say, if they're cuttin' teeth you ken let 'em chew the beef bones, it helps 'em thro'. Fancy canned truck ain't good 'less it's baked beans, though I 'lows beans cooked reg'lar is best. You soak 'em twenty-four hours, an' boil 'em soft, an' see the water don't boil away. Fruit is good if they ain't subjec' to colic, which needs poultices o' linseed, an' truck like that. Don't let 'em eat till they're blown up like frogs, an'—you got all that? "

"Ye-es," replied the bewildered man a little helplessly.

"Well," continued the smiling girl, "then there's their manners an' things."

Toby nodded vaguely.

"You'll need to give 'em bed at sundown," Birdie hurried on. "An' up at sunrise. Clothes needs washin' at least once a month—with soap. See they says their prayers, an' bath 'em once a week reg'lar—with soap. But do it Sundays. An' after that give 'em a Bible talk for an hour. Then I dessay they'll need physic once a week—best give it Saturday nights. Don't fix 'em that way same as a horse, their stummicks ain't made of leather. You got all that? "

Toby gave a bewildered nod.

"How 'bout when they're sick? " he asked.

"Sick? Why, see they don't muss their clothes," Birdie answered cheerfully. "Guess that's put you wise to most everything."

"Sure." Toby slid from the table, feeling dazed. Nor had he the courage to ask any more questions. He was trying hard to fix the salient points of the information in his whirling brain, but all he could remember was that all washing must be done with soap, and the children must have bones to keep their teeth right. He clung to these things desperately, and felt that he must get away quickly before they, too, should slip through the sieve of his memory.

"Guess I'll git along an'—an' see to things," he murmured vaguely, without glancing in Birdie's direction. "You

said beef bones?" he added, passing a hand perplexedly across his forehead.

"Sure," smiled the girl.

"Good. Thanks." Then he moved heavily off. "Beef bones and soap—bath an' Bible talk; beef bones an' soap——"

The girl watched him vanish behind the closing door, muttering as he went to "see to things."

She stood for some moments where he had left her. The smile was still in her eyes, but its humour had died out. She was unfeignedly sorry he had gone. He was such a good-natured simpleton, she thought. A real good-hearted sort. Just the sort to make a husband worth having. Ah, well, he had gone! Better luck next time.

She turned away with a deep, sentimental sigh, and crossed over to the cupboard. She drew out her work once more and again spread out the crumpled paper pattern upon the gossamer lawn.

Yes, Toby would have suited her well. She heaved another sigh. He had remittances from home, too. And he wouldn't be difficult to manage. His head was rather a funny shape, and his face didn't suggest brightness, but then——

She began to snip at the material with her rusty scissors. But just as her mind had fully concentrated upon her task a sudden sound startled her. She looked up, listening, and the next moment the door was flung wide, and Sandy Joyce stood framed in the opening.

CHAPTER XIV

BIRDIE GIVES MORE ADVICE

THE ordinary woman would probably have resented this second interruption, taking into consideration the nature of Birdie's occupation, and the fact that Toby's visit had hardly proved a success from her point of view. But Birdie was only partially ordinary. Her love and admiration for the opposite sex was so much the chief part of her composition that all other considerations gave way before it. Her heart thrilled with a sickly sentiment at all times. To her men were the gods of the universe, and, as such, must be propitiated, at least in theory. In practice it might be necessary to flout them, to tease them, even to snub them—on rare occasions. But this would only come after intimacy had been established. After that her attitude would be governed by circumstances, and even then her snubs, her floutings, her teasing, would only be done as a further lure, a further propitiation. She loved them all with a wonderful devotion. Her heart was large, so large that the whole race of men could have been easily lost in its mysterious and obscure recesses.

Again her work was bundled into the cupboard, the poor flimsy pattern further suffering. But beyond a casual wonder if the garment would eventually be wearable, cut from so mangled a pattern, she had no real care.

Her smiling eyes turned readily upon the newcomer the moment her secret labours had been hidden from prying male eyes. And there was no mistaking her cordiality for this cold-eyed visitor.

"Sakes alive! but you do look fierce," she cried challengingly. "You sure must be in a bad temper."

But Sandy's expression was simply the outcome of long and difficult consideration. As a matter of fact, in his hard way, he was feeling very delighted. His past married

experience had brought him to the conviction that here was the only person in Suffering Creek who could help him.

And, furthermore, he was well satisfied to think that only his experience as a married man could have suggested to him this means of gaining the information required by their president, and so shown him the way to surpass his comrades in his efforts on behalf of the Trust.

But his knowledge of womankind warned him that he must not be too hasty. He must not show his hand until he had established himself in a favourable position in the susceptible Birdie's heart. With this object in view he set himself to offer his blandishments in characteristic fashion. He did not suffer from Toby's complaint of bashfulness. Married life had cured him of that. In consequence, his method, if crude, was direct.

"I can't say the same of you, Birdie," he declared unsmilingly. "You're bloomin' as—as a kebbige."

"Kebbige?" sniffed the girl.

"Kebbige, sure," nodded the man of married experience. "Guess mebbe it ain't a bokay fer smell. But fer taste—with corned beef? Gee!"

Birdie took no umbrage.

"You got to it—after awhiles," she remarked slyly. Then she added, with a gush, "D'you know, I'm allus most scared to death of you men. You're that big an' strong, it makes me feel you could well-nigh eat me."

Sandy availed himself of the invitation.

"A tasty mouthful," he declared. And without more ado he passed round the table, caught her quickly in his arms, and, without the smallest expression of interest, kissed her. If interest were lacking, his movements were so swift that, had the girl the least idea of avoiding the embrace—which she hadn't—she would have found it difficult to do so.

"You men are ones!" she declared, with a little gasp, as his arms fell from about her.

"How's that?"

"I never did—the cheek of some of you!"

"A feller needs cheek," replied the self-satisfied widower. "'Specially with pretty gals around," he added condescendingly.

Birdie eyed him archly.

"Gals?" she inquired.

"I should have said 'gal.'"

The laughing nod that rewarded him assured Sandy that he was well on the right track, and at once he took the opportunity of introducing the object of his visit.

"Say," he began, "guess you never tho't o' gettin' hitched up to a feller?"

Birdie lowered her eyelids and struggled for a blush, which somehow defied her best efforts. But her subtleties were quite lost upon Sandy, and in his eagerness he waited for no reply.

"No, course you hain't. You got so many beaus to choose from. 'Sides," he added thoughtfully, "gettin' married sure needs special savvee. What I mean," he explained, seeing the amused wonder in the girl's now wide eyes, "you kind o' need eddicatin' to git married. Y'see, when you get fixed that way you sort of, in a manner of speakin', got to unlearn things you never learnt, an' learn them things what can't never be taught. What I mean is, marriage is a sort of eddication of itself, wot don't learn you nuthin' till you git —unmarried. Savee?"

The girl shook her head in bewilderment.

"That's sure too bright fer me."

"That's 'cos you ain't been married. Y'see, I have."

"Can't you put it easier—seein' I ain't been married?"

"Sure I can." Sandy took up a position on the edge of the table with such a judicial air that the girl started to giggle.

"See here," he began largely. "Now what d'you know 'bout kids—raisin' 'em, I mean?"

The girl's eyes twinkled on the verge of laughing outright.

"Zip's kids?" she inquired shrewdly.

Sandy started and frowned.

"What d'you mean—Zip's kids?"

"Oh, just nothing," said Birdie airily. "Seein' kids was in your mind, I naturally tho't o' Zip's."

Sandy nodded. But he was only half convinced. How on earth, he wondered, did she know he was thinking of Zip's kids? He felt that it would be best to nip that idea in the bud. It was undignified that he should appear to be interested in Zip's twins.

"I ain't interested in no special kids," he said, with some dignity. "I was just theorizin'—like. Now, if you got married, wot you know of raisin' kids? Guess you're that ignorant of the subject maybe you'd feed 'em hay? "

Birdie laughed dutifully, but her retort was rather disconcerting.

"You bin married—how'd you feed 'em? I'm learning."

"How'd I feed 'em? " Sandy eyed his tormentor severely. "That ain't the question. How'd you feed 'em? "

The girl thought for a moment, and then looked up brightly.

"If they was Zip's kids——"

"I said they ain't."

"Well, if they were, I'd say——"

"See here, cut Zip's kids out. They ain't in this shootin' match," cried Sandy testily.

But Birdie persisted slyly.

"Y'see, I must get some kids in my eye if I'm to answer you right," she said. "I can see things better that way. Now, if they were Zip's kids——"

"Which they ain't," asseverated the man doggedly.

"Which they ain't," nodded Birdie, "I'd feed 'em cereals an' pap——"

Sandy's face suddenly cleared. His whole being seemed to expand.

"Say, you're a bright gal," he declared. "Cereals an' pap. That's dead right. Say, you know more than—— You'd give 'em milk to drink—now? " he suggested.

"Oh no, nothing like that. Water."

The man looked disappointed.

"Water? " he said. "You sure of that? But I guess you'd give 'em banannys? "

Again the girl shook her head.

"Fruit gives 'em colic."

"Ah, yes, that's so. They'd need physic then, wouldn't they? "

"You need to be easy with physic, too," declared the girl, with sparkling eyes. "Don't give 'em physic ever unless they're real sick."

The man's crestfallen appearance set Birdie giggling. She

was enjoying the situation. She meant to upset all Sandy's preconceived ideas.

"Now, pork?" he suggested, but with less assurance.

But Birdie was obdurate.

"Never," she declared emphatically. "Beans, yes. There's good nourishment in beans. Then ther's fresh vegetables—heaps of 'em."

"Ah! Now, how 'bout fixin' them right—the kids, I mean? Guess they'll need bathin'."

But Birdie fell upon him with a strong denial.

"Bath?" she cried. "Gee! you do run on. Guess you want to hand 'em newmony. Kids sure don't never need bathin'. Jest a lick with soap an' hot water once a week. An', say," she went on, suddenly remembering something she had told Toby in a fit of mischief, "kep their food soft, or you'll break their young teeth."

Sandy's eyes lit, and in an unguarded moment he admitted that the thought had occurred to him. Birdie caught him up at once.

"I tho't you was just astin' me these questions to see if I was right for gettin' married?" she protested innocently.

"That's so—course," he said hastily. Then he wriggled out of it. "But how'd I be able to say you was right if I hadn't tho't on things some myself?"

"Ah! I didn't just think of that."

"Course not. Gals never see the fine points of good argyment."

Sandy's superiority was overwhelming, but Birdie had borne with him with amused patience until now. She had known him a long time as a boarder, but never until now had she realized the blundering conceit that was his. She felt that she had given him rope enough, and it was time to bring him up with a jerk.

"Thank you kindly, sir," she mocked him, curtseying.

"You're welcome, ma'am," Sandy returned, with a clumsy bow, failing to realize her change of attitude.

"If you guess I'm right for marryin', maybe you'll hand me my diploma," she said, with a demure down-drooping of her eyelids.

She waited, and finally glanced up into his flushed face.

Her sarcasm had struck home at last, and without hesitation she went on mercilessly—

"Say, if you ain't goin' to hand me a diploma, guess you can let me get on with my sewin'. Havin' been a married man, maybe you'll understand men-folk ain't a heap of use around when a woman's sewin'. Guess they're handy ladlin' out most things, but I'd say a man ain't no more use round the eye of a needle than a camel."

Sandy's dignity and temper were ruffled. It was inconceivable that Birdie—or, as he mentally apostrophized her, "this blamed hash-slinger"—should so flout him. How dared she? He was so angry that words for once utterly failed him, and he moved towards the door with gills as scarlet as any blustering turkey-cock. But Birdie had no idea of sparing him, and hurled her final sarcasm as she turned again to her cupboard.

"I'd hate to be one o' Zip's kids with you gettin' busy around me," she cried, chuckling in an infuriating manner.

It was too much for Sandy. He turned fiercely as he reached the door.

"You're 'bug,'" he declared roughly. "I tell you, Zip's kids ain't nothin' to do with me——"

"Which, I'd say, was lucky for them," cried Birdie airily.

"An' I'd jest like to say that when a genelman gits around to do the perlite by a no-account mutton-worrier, he figgers to be treat right——"

Birdie turned on him with cold eyes.

"I'll sure be treatin' you right," she said, "when I tell you that door don't need shuttin' after you. It's on the swing."

She did not wait to witness her guest's departure. She felt it would not be graceful, under the circumstances. So, pushing her head into the cupboard, she once more gathered up her work.

When the soft swish of the swing-door told her that Sandy's departure had been taken, she emerged with her bundle and spread it out on the table for the third time. She was all smiles. She was not a bit angry with the foolish widower. This dogmatic attitude of mind, this wonderful self-satisfaction, were peculiar to the creature; he couldn't help it. But it had roused a mischievous spirit in her, and the

temptation was too great to resist. The only thing she regretted was having let him kiss her, and she at once put up her hand to wipe the spot where the operation had been performed. Anyhow, she had certainly taken him down a peg or two, and the thought set her in high good-humour.

Nor could she help wondering at his stupidity in imagining she couldn't see through his desire for information about children. It was laughable, coming after Toby's. Oh, these men! They were dear, foolish creatures. Poor kids, she thought, her mind reverting to Zip's twins. What had they done to have this pack of foolish people worrying over them? Were they all going to take a hand in bringing the youngsters up? Well, anyhow, she pitied them.

She smiled at her thoughts as the busy scissors snipped their way round the pattern. These men were too funny. First Toby, now Sandy—who next?

She started and looked up, her scissors poised in the air. The swing-door had swished open, and Wild Bill stood before her.

"Good sakes!" she cried. "How you scared me!" Then, realizing what lay before her, she grabbed up her work, and was for returning it to the cupboard.

But Wild Bill was in a hurry. Besides, he had nothing of the ingratiating ways of the other men about him. He saw her object, and stayed her in his own peculiar authoritative fashion.

"Say, you can quit huggin' them fixin's," he cried. "I ain't come pryin' around a leddy's wardrobe. You ken jest set down with paper an' ink an' things, an' write down how best Zip's kids can be raised. I'll git right back for it in haf-an-hour."

Nor did he wait for any reply. It was taken for granted that his demands would be promptly acceded to, and he vanished as abruptly as he came. The swing-door closed, and Birdie gave a sigh.

"An' him, too," she murmured. "Well, I do declare. It just licks creation."

But this was a different proposition to either Toby or Sandy. She sprang to her task for the great Wild Bill in a way that spoke volumes for her sentimental heart. Wild

Bill? Well, she would never have owned it, but there was just one man in the world that scared Birdie to death, and at the same time made her think her path was a bed of roses, and that was Wild Bill. In an astonishingly short time she was sitting at the table poring over a writing-pad, and biting the already well-chewed end of a pen.

Outside, in the smoke-laden atmosphere of the store, amidst the busy click of poker chips and clink of glasses, Wild Bill was talking earnestly to Minky, who was standing behind the counter.

They had been talking for some time. Minky's eyes frequently wandered in the direction of a table where four strangers were playing. But no one could have guessed, in his quiet scrutiny, the anxiety that lay behind it.

"You *must* git out to-night?" he inquired of his hawk-visaged friend.

"Sure," responded Bill absently.

"High finance?"

Bill nodded, with the ghost of a smile.

"A gang of rich guys," he said. "They're gathering at Spawn City for a financial descent on Suffering Creek. They're all minin' folk. Guess they'll be yearning for a big game."

"When'll you git back?"

"Noon, day after to-morrow, maybe."

Bill had turned away, and was abstractedly contemplating the strangers. Suddenly he turned again, and his steely eyes fixed themselves on the troubled Minky.

"Say, things is gettin' on your nerves. It ain't yet. Those folks is only lookin' fer pointers."

"An' findin' 'em?"

"Mebbe. But it takes time. Say, we ain't dead in Suffering Creek yet. I'll be around before——"

"Trouble gits busy." Minky laughed hollowly.

"Sure. I'm most gener'ly around when trouble—gits busy. I'm made like that."

"I'm glad."

Bill drank up the remains of his drink and began to move away.

"Wher' you going now?" inquired Minky.

"See my plugs fed an' watered, and then gittin' around my shack. I've got to see some folks before I hit the trail. Say, I ain't got big enough wad. Best hand me a couple o' thousand."

Minky dived under his counter, and, after fumbling for some time, reappeared with the required sum in United States currency.

"Good luck," he said, as he passed it across the counter cautiously.

"Thanks. An', say—see the boys keep a close eye on Zip—an' the kids. So long."

He moved away, but instead of passing out of the front door he disappeared into the dining-room at the back.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRUST AT WORK

WILD BILL'S hut presented an unusually animated appearance. The customary oil-lamp was receiving the support of two vilely smelling yellow candles. The additional light thus obtained was hardly in proportion to the offensiveness of the added aroma. Still, the remoter corners of the place were further lit up, and the rough faces of the four occupants of the room were thrown into stronger relief.

But the animation of the scene was rather a matter of visual illusion than actuality. For Wild Bill, in his right of proprietorship, was lounging on his blanketed bunk, while Toby's inanimate form robbed him of the extreme foot of it. Sunny Oak was hugging to himself what comfort there was to be obtained from the broken chair, which usually supported Bill's wash bucket, set well within elbow-reach of the table on which the illuminations had been placed. Sandy Joyce with unusual humility—possibly the result of his encounter with Birdie—was crouching on an upturned cracker box.

There was a wonderful intentness, expectancy in every eye except Bill's. In Toby's there was triumphal anticipation, in Sandy's a conscious assurance. Bill had just come in from preparing his horses for their night journey, and, with an hour and more to spare, and the prospect of a long night before him, was anxious to take things as easy as possible.

Reaching his arms above his head he pushed his hands behind it for support, and opened the proceedings.

"You fellers been busy?" he inquired.

And promptly every mouth opened to give proud assurance. But the gambler checked the impulse with grating sarcasm.

"I ain't got but one pair ears," he said, "so you'll each wait till you're ast questions. Bein' president o' this yer Trust I'll do most of the yappin'," he added grimly. "I'm goin' away to-night fer a couple o' days. That's why this meetin's called. An' the object of it is to fix things right for Zip, an' to 'range so he gits a chance to put 'em through. Now, I seen enough of him—an' others," with a swift, withering glance in Sunny's direction, "to know he's right up again a proposition that ain't no one man affair. Combination is the only bluff to fix them kids of his right. We've most of us got ideas, but like as not they ain't all we guess 'em to be. In some cases ther' ain't a doubt of it. Without sayin' nothin' of anybody, I sure wouldn't trust Toby here to raise a crop of well-grown weeds—without help. An' Sandy, fer all he's a married man, don't seem to have prospered in his knowledge of kids. As for Sunny, well, the sight of him around a kid ain't wholesome. An' as fer me, guess I may know a deal about cookin' a jack-pot, but I'd hate to raise the bet about any other kind o' pot. Seein' things is that way with us we'll git to work systematic. Ther' ain't a gamble in life that ain't worked the better fer a system. So, before we get busy, I'll ast you, Sunny, to grab the grip under my bunk, an' you'll find in it, som'eres under the card decks, paper an' ink. You'll jest fix them right, an' take things down, so we don't make no sort o' mistake."

He waited until Sunny had procured the necessary writing materials and set them out on the table. Then he went on in his strong, autocratic fashion.

"Now," he said, fixing his eyes on Toby. "You'se fellers has had time to make inquiries, an' knowing you fer bright boys I don't guess you lost any time. The subject is the raisin' of kids. Mebbe Toby, you bein' the youngest member of this doggone Trust, an' a real smart lad, mebbe you'll open your face an' give us pointers."

By the time he finished speaking every eye was turned on the triumphantly grinning Toby.

"I sure will," he said, with a confidence surprising in a man who had been so bashful in his interview with Birdie. Just for a moment one of his great hands went up to his cheek, and he gently smoothed it, as though the recollection

of the slap he had received in the process of gathering information was being used to inspire his memory. "Y'see," he began, "I got friends around Suffering Creek what knows all about kids. So—so I jest asted 'em, Mr. President."

He cleared his throat and stared up at the roof. He was evidently struggling hard with memory.

Bill lolled over and drew a closely written document from his pocket and began to peruse it. Sandy tapped the floor impatiently with one foot. He was annoyed that his evidence was not demanded first. Sunny sat with pen poised, waiting for the word to write.

Toby's eyes grew troubled.

"What they chiefly need," he murmured, his face becoming more and more intent, "what they—chiefly—need—is——" He was labouring hard. Then suddenly his face brightened into a foolish smile. "I got it," he cried triumphantly, "I got it. What kids need is beef bones an' soap!"

In the deathly silence that followed his statement Toby looked for approving glances. But he looked in vain. Sunny had dropped his pen and made a blot on his paper. Sandy's annoyance had changed into malicious triumph. But the president of the Trust made no move. He merely let his small eyes emit a steely glance over the top of his paper, directed with stern disapproval on the hopeful "remittance" man.

"An' what 'bug-house,'" he inquired, with biting sarcasm, "is your bright friends spendin' their va-cation at?"

Toby flushed to the roots of his unkempt hair. The sudden death of his triumph was almost tragic. His face fell, and his heavy jaw dropped in pathetic astonishment. But it was not Bill's sarcasm alone that so bit into his bones, it was the jeering light he witnessed in Sandy's eyes, combined with the undisguised ridicule of Sunny's open grin. His blood began to rise; he felt it tingling in the great extremities of his long arms. The obvious retort of the witless was surging through his veins and driving him.

But the Trust president was talking, and the calm of coming storm was held for a moment. But it is doubtful if the object of his harangue grasped anything of his meaning, so great was his anger against his grinning comrades.

"Beef bones an' soap!" cried Bill harshly, at the unheed-

ing man. "If they was asses bones we'd sure only need to open up your family mausoleum to git enough bones to raise a farm o' babbies on. I'd like to say right here, the feller wot don't know the natural use o' soap is a danger to the health an' sanitary fixin's o' this yer camp. Beef bones an' soap!" he went on, as though the very combination of the words was an offence to his gastronomical senses. "You pumpkin-faced idjut, you mush-headed tank o' wisdom, you masterpiece of under-done mule brain, how in sizzlin' torment you're figgerin' to ladle soap into the vitals of inoffendin' babbies, an' push beef bones through their innercent stummicks, 'ud par'lize the brains of every science society in this yer country to know, an' drive the whole world o' physic dealers barkin' like a pack o' mangy coyotes wi' their bellies flappin' in a nor'-east blizzard. Gosh—dang it, you misfortunate offspring of Jonah parents, we're settin' out to raise kids. We ain't startin' a patent manure fact'ry, nor runnin' a Chinese hand laundry——"

But the president's picturesque flow was lost in a sudden commotion. The calm was broken, and the storm burst. The weight of ridicule in his comrades' faces was too much for Toby, and he leapt from the foot of the bunk on which he was sitting. He projected himself with more force than cunning in the direction of the grinning loafer, bent on bodily hurt to his victim. But his leap fell short by reason of Sunny's agility. The latter snatched up the oil-lamp and dodged behind the table, with the result that Toby's great body sent the candles flying, and itself fell amidst the legs of the upset table. He was on his feet in an instant, however, ready to continue with all his might his vengeful pursuit. But the heavy hand of Bill fell upon his coat collar with irresistible force, and, with a jerk, he was hurled across the room out of harm's way.

"Ther's more hell to the back o' that if you come ag'in, Toby," the gambler cried, with cold threat. "An' as for you, Sunny," he went on, turning on the Trust secretary, "I'll set the boys to wash you clean in Minky's trough if you so much as smile ag'in till we're through. Fix them candles, an' sit right down—the lot of you."

He stood for a moment eyeing the lurid face of Toby. Nor did he move until the burly remittance man had pulled

himself together. He watched him settle himself again on the foot of the bunk, passive but inwardly raging. Then, as the candles were once more replaced in the bottles and lit, he calmly picked up his document and returned to his couch. The whole episode passed in a few moments, and outward equanimity was quickly restored. Such was the hot, impulsive nature of these men.

The president lost no time in proceeding with the business in hand. He addressed his friends generally.

"I ain't goin' to say a word 'bout the elegant information gathered by our bright junior member," he said slowly. "You've all heard it, an' I guess that's sure all that's needed. Wher' he got it, is his funeral—or should be. Leastways, if it ain't satisfact'ry it shows laudable enterprise on his part—which is good for this yer Trust."

He paused and referred to his document. And in that moment, burning to further crush Toby, and add to his own glorification by reason of the superiority of his information, Sandy cleared his throat to speak. This was to be the moment of his triumph. He meant to wipe out the memory of past failures in one sweep.

"I consulted a lady friend of mine——" he began. But Bill waved him to silence.

"You needn't worry nothin'," he said coldly. "I got it all wrote down here."

"How you got it?" cried Sandy. "I ain't said it."

Bill's eyes met the other's angry glance with that cold irony that was so much a part of his nature.

"Guess your leddy friend wrote it," he said. And, as he heard the words, the last of Toby's ill-humour vanished. His stupid face wreathed itself into a broad grin as he watched the blank look of disappointment spread itself over Sandy's face.

"Listen here, all of you," the president went on, quite undisturbed by the feelings he had stirred in the widower. "This is wot the leddy says. She's writ it all so ther' can't be no mistake."

Then he began to read from his document with careful distinctness.

"'Don't take no notice of what I told Toby Jenks an' Sandy Joyce. I jest fooled 'em proper. Toby's a nice boy, but he ain't got brains enough to kep himself warm on a

summer day, so I didn't waste nothin' on him, 'cep' time. As fer Sandy, he's sech a con-se-quenshul——' Have I got that word right, Sunny?" Bill inquired blandly of the secretary.

"You sure have," grinned Sunny, enjoying himself.

"'Sech a consequenshul fool of an idjut man,'" Bill read on, with a glance into Sandy's scarlet face, "'that I hadn't no time but to push him out of this dinin'-room.'"

"The miser'ble hash-slinger," exploded the exasperated Sandy, springing to his feet, his eyes blazing with impotent fury.

"Sit down," commanded the president. "This yere is a proper meetin' of the Zip Trust, an' don't call fer no langwidge ag'in a defenceless woman."

"Then she ain't no right to say things," cried the outraged man.

"She ain't. She's wrote 'em," retorted Bill, in a manner that left nothing more to be said. "'Consequenshul,' was the word," he went on, rolling it off his tongue as though he enjoyed its flavour, "an' I allow it must have took her thinking some to be so elegant. You'll set," he added, glancing up severely at the still standing man.

Sandy dropped back on his box, but he was anything but appeased. His dignity was hurt sorely. He, who understood women so well, to be treated like this. Then he tried to console himself with the opinion that after all Birdie was not exactly a woman, only a "pot-rustler." But Bill was pushing the business forward. He wanted to get the matter in hand settled.

"Here," he went on, "this is how she says of them kids: 'You can't jest lay down reg'lations fer feedin'. Jest feed 'em natural, an' if they git a pain dose 'em with physic. Ther's some things you must kep 'em from gittin' into their stummicks. Kindlin' wood is ridiculous fer them to chew, ther' ain't no goodness in it, an' it's li'ble to run slivvers into their vitals. Sulphur matches ain't good fer 'em to suck. I ain't got nothing to say 'bout the sulphur, but the phosphorus is sure injurious, an', anyway, it's easy settin' 'emselves afire. Kids is ter'ble fond of sand, an' gravel, an' mud, inside an' out. Outside ain't no harm, 'cep' it keps you washin' 'em, but inside's likely to give 'em colic. Don't let 'em climb on tables an' things. Ther' never was a kid who

could climb on to a table but what could fall off. Don't let 'em lick stove-black off a hot cookstove. This don't need explainin' to folk of ord'nary intelligence. Coal is for makin' a fire, an' ain't good eatin'. Boilin' water has its uses, but it ain't good play fer kids. Guns an' knives ain't needed fer kids playin' Injun. These things is jest general notions to kep in your head fer ord'nary guidance. Kids' clothes needs washin' every Monday—with soap. Mebbe you'll need to wash every day if kids is frolicsome. Bow-ties is for Sunday wear. Girl's hair needs braidin' every night, an' don't leave chewin' t'baccer around. Kids is sure to eat it. Best give 'em physic every Saturday night, an' bath 'em Sunday mornin'. Don't use no hand scrubber. If you can't git through the dirt by ord'nary washin', best leave it. Kids is tender-skinned anyway. After their bath set 'em out in the sun, an' give 'em an elegant Bible talk. Ther' ain't nothin' like a Bible talk fer kids. It sets 'em wise to religion early, an' gives 'em a good impression o' the folks raisin' 'em. Ef they ast too many questions you need to answer 'em with discretion——' "

"Wot's she mean by that?" asked Toby, all interest in the mass of detail.

"Mean? Why——" Bill paused considering.

Sunny looked up from his writing.

"Why, don't say fool things fer the sake of gassin'!" he explained readily. "Everything you tell 'em needs a moral."

"Moral?" murmured Toby vaguely.

"Yes, moral."

But Sandy saw a chance of restoring his fallen prestige, and promptly seized upon it.

"Moral," he said, beaming with self-satisfaction, "is handin' a lesson all wrop up in fancy words so's to set folks cussin' like mad they can't understand it, an' hatin' themselves when they're told its meanin'. Now, if I was goin' to show you what a blamed idjut you was without jest sayin' so——"

"Shut up!" cried Bill. And without waiting for a reply he read on, "'—with discretion. If you treat kids proper they mostly raise themselves, which is jest Natur'. Don't worry yourself, 'less they fall into a swill-barrel, or do some ridiculous stunt o' that natur'—an' don't worry *them.*

Ther' ain't no sense to anybody goin' around with notions they ken flap their wings, an' cluck like a broody hen; an' scratchin' worms is positive ridiculous. Help 'em when they need help, otherwise let 'em fall around till they knock sense into theirselves. Jest let 'em be kids as long as Natur' fancies, so's when they git growed up, which they're goin' to do anyways, they'll likely make elegant men an' women. Ef you set 'em under glass cases they'll sure get fixed into things what glass cases is made to hold—that's images. I don't guess I kin tell you nothin' more 'bout kids, seein' I ain't a mother, but jest a pot-wolloper.' "

Bill folded the paper as he finished reading, and silently handed it across to the secretary. Somehow he seemed impressed with the information the paper contained. The whole meeting seemed impressed. Even Sandy had no comment to offer, while Toby resorted to biting his forefinger and gazing stupidly at the opposite wall. It was Sunny who finally broke the silence.

"Guess I'll jest writ' out the chief points fer Zip's guidance?" he asked.

Bill nodded.

"That's it, sure," he agreed. "Jest the chief points. Then you'll hand it to Zip to-morrer mornin', an', ef he needs it, you can explain wot he ain't wise to. I'd like to say right here that this hash-slinger has got savvee. Great big savvee, an' a heap of it. I ain't a hell of a lot on the kid racket, they mostly make me sick to death. In a manner o' speakin', I don't care a cuss for Zip nor his kids. Ef they drown theirselves in a swill-bar'l it's his funeral, an' their luck, an' it don't cut no ice with me. But, cuss me, ef I ken stand to see a low-down skunk like this yer James come it over a feller-citizen o' Suffering Creek, an' it's our duty to see Zip gets thro'. I'm sore on James. Sore as hell. I ain't no Bible-thumpin' mush-hearted, push-me-amongst-the angels feller anyways. An' you boys has got to git right on to that, quick." He glared round at his friends defiantly, as though daring them to do otherwise. But as nobody gave a sign of doubt on the subject, he had no alternative but to continue. "I'm jest sore on James an'——" He hesitated for the fraction of a second, but went on almost immediately.

"—ther' may come a time when the play gits busy. Get

me? Wal," as Sandy and Sunny nodded assent, and Toby sat all eyes for the speaker, "this yere Trust is a goin' concern, an', I take it, we mean business. So, though we ain't runnin' a noospaper, maybe we'll need a fightin' editor after all. If we need a fightin' editor we'll sure need a fightin' staff. That's jest logic. I'll ast you right here, is you boys that fightin' staff? If so, guess I'm fightin' editor. How?"

His eyes were on Sunny Oak. And that individual's unwashed face broadened into a cheerful grin.

"Fightin' don't come under the headin' of work—proper," he said. "Guess I'm in."

Bill turned on Sandy.

"You ain't got the modest beauty o' the vi'let," he said, with saturnine levity. "How you feelin'?"

"Sure good," exclaimed the widower. "But I'd feel better lettin' air into the carkis of James."

"Good," muttered Bill. "An' you, Toby?" he went on, turning on the "remittance" man. "You're a heap fat, an' need somethin' to get it down. How you fancy things?"

"I'd as lief scrap 'side these scalliwags as ag'in 'em," he replied, indicating his companions with an amiable grin.

Bill nodded.

"This yere Trust is a proper an' well-found enterprise," he said gravely. "As fer Minky, I guess we can count him in most anything that ain't dishonest. So—wal, this is jest precautious. Ther's nuthin' doin' yet. But you see," he added, with a shadowy grin, "life's mostly chock-full of fancy things we don't figger on, an' anyway I can't set around easy when folks gets gay. I'll be back to hum day after tomorrer, or the next day, an', meanwhiles, you'll see things are right with Zip. An' don't kep far away from Minky's store when strangers is around. Minky's a good friend o' mine, an' a good friend to most o' you, so—well, guns is good med'cine ef folks git gay, an' are yearnin' to handle dust what ain't theirs."

"Them strangers?" suggested Sandy. "Is——?"

Bill shrugged.

"Strangers is strangers, an' gold-dust is gold-dust," he said shrewdly. "An' when the two git together ther's gener'ly a disease sets in that guns is the best med'cine for. That's 'bout all."

CHAPTER XVI

ZIP'S GRATITUDE

WHAT a complicated machinery human nature is! It seems absurd that a strongly defined character should be just as full of surprises as the weakest; that the fantastic, the unexpected, even the illogical, are as surely found in the one as in the other. It would be so nice, so simple and easy, to sit down and foreshadow a certain course of action for a certain individual under a given stress; and to be sure that, in human psychology, two and two make precisely four, no more and no less.

But such is not the case. In human psychology two and two can just as easily make ten, or fifteen, or any other number; and prophecy in the matter is about as great a waste of time as worrying over the possibilities of the weather. The constitution of the nervous system cannot be estimated until put to the test. And when the first test has revealed to us the long-awaited secret, it is just as likely to be flatly contradicted by the second. The whole thing is the very mischief.

Those who knew him would have been quite certain that in Scipio's case there could only be one result from the addition of the two and two of his psychology. In a man of his peculiar mental calibre it might well seem that there could be no variation to the sum. And the resulting prophecy would necessarily be an evil, or at least a pessimistic one. He was so helpless, so lacking in all the practicalities of human life. He seemed to have one little focus that was quite incapable of expansion, of adaptability. That focus was almost entirely filled by his Jessie's image, with just a small place in it reserved for his twins. Take the woman out of it, and, to all intents and purposes, he looked out upon a dead white blank.

Every thought in his inadequate brain was centred round his wife. She was the mainspring of his every emotion. His love for her was his whole being. It was something so great and strong that it enveloped all his senses. She was his, and he was incapable of imagining life without her. She was his, and only death could alter so obvious a fact. She was his vanguard in life's battle, a support that shored up his confidence and courage to face, with a calm determination, whatever that battle had to offer him.

But with Jessie's going all prophecy would have remained unfulfilled. Scipio did not go under in the manner to have been expected of him. After the first shock, outwardly at least, there appeared to be no change in him. His apparently colourless personality drifted on in precisely the same amiable, inconsequent manner. What his moments of solitude were, only he knew. The agony of grief through which he passed, the long sleepless nights, the heartbreaking sense of loss, these things lay hidden under his meaningless exterior, which, however, defied the revelation of his secret.

After the passing of the first madness which had sent him headlong in pursuit of his wife, a sort of mental evolution set in. That unadaptable focus of his promptly became adaptable. And where it had been incapable of expansion, it slowly began to expand. It grew, and, whereas before his Jessie had occupied full place, his twins now became the central feature.

The original position was largely reversed, but it was chiefly the growth of the images of his children, and not the diminishing of the figure of his wife. And with this new aspect came calmness. Nothing could change his great love for his erring Jessie, nothing could wipe out his sense of loss; his grief was always with him. But whereas, judged by the outward seeming of his character, he should have been crushed under Fate's cruel blow, an inverse process seemed to have set in. He was lifted, exalted to the almost sublime heights where his beacon-fire of duty shone.

Yes, but the whole thing was so absurdly twisted. The care of his children occupied his entire time now, so that his work, in seeking that which was required to support them, had to be entirely neglected. He had fifty dollars between

him and starvation for his children. Nor could he see his way to earning more. The struggles of his unpractical mind were painful. It was a problem quite beyond him. He struggled nobly with it, but he saw no light ahead, and, with that curious singleness of purpose that was his, he eventually abandoned the riddle, and devoted his whole thought to the children. Any other man would probably have decided to hire himself out to work on the claims of other men, and so hope to earn sufficient to hire help in the care of the twins, but not so Scipio. He believed that their future well-being lay in his claim. If that could not be worked, then there was no other way.

He had just finished clearing up his hut, and the twins were busy with their games outside in the sun, aided by their four-legged yellow companion, whose voice was always to be heard above their excited squabblings and laughter. So Sunny Oak found things when he slouched up to the hut with the result of the Trust's overnight meeting in his pocket.

The loafer came in with a grin of good-nature on his perspiring and dirty face. He was feeling very self-righteous. It was pleasant to think he was doing a good work. So much so that the effort of doing it did not draw the usual protest from him.

He glanced about him with a tolerant eye, feeling that henceforth, under the guidance of the Trust he represented, Scipio's condition would certainly be improved. But somehow his mental patronage received a quiet set-back. The hut looked so different. There was a wholesome cleanliness about it that was quite staggering. Sunny remembered it as it was when he had last seen it under his régime, and the contrast was quite startling. Scipio might be incapable of organization, but he certainly could scour and scrub.

Sunny raked at his beard with his unclean finger-nails. Yes, Zip must have spent hours of unremitting labour on the place since he had seen it last.

However, he lost no time in carrying out his mission.

"Kind o' busy, Zip?" he greeted the little man pleasantly.

Scipio raised a pair of shadowed eyes from the inside of the well-scoured fry-pan he was wiping.

"I'm mostly through fixin' these chores—for awhiles," he

replied quietly. Then he nodded in the direction of the children's voices. "Guess I'm goin' to take the kiddies down to the creek to clean 'em. They need cleanin' a heap."

Sunny nodded gravely. He was thinking of those things he had so carefully written out.

"They sure do," he agreed. "Bath oncet a week. But not use a hand-scrubber, though," he added, under a wave of memory. "Kids is tender skinned," he explained.

"Pore little bits," the father murmured tenderly. Then he went on more directly to his visitor, "But they *do* need washin'. It's kind of natural fer kids to fancy dirt. After that," he went on, his eyes drifting over to a pile of dirty clothes stacked on a chair, "I'll sure have to do a bit of washing." He set the frying-pan down beside the stove and moved over to the clothes, picking up the smallest pair of child's knickers imaginable. They were black with dirt, and he held them up before Sunny's wondering eyes and smiled pathetically. "Ridic'lous small," he said, with an odd twist of his pale lips. "Pore little gal." Then his scanty eyebrows drew together perplexedly, and that curious expression of helplessness that was his crept into his eyes. "Them frills an' bits git me some," he said in a puzzled way. "Y'see, I ain't never used an iron much, to speak of. It's kind of awkward using an iron."

Sunny nodded. Somehow he wished he knew something about using an iron. Birdie had said nothing about it.

"Guess you hot it on the stove," he hazarded, after a moment's thought.

"Yes, I'd say you hot it," agreed Scipio. "It's after that."

"Yes." Sunny found himself thinking hard. "You got an iron?" he inquired presently.

"Sure—two." Scipio laid the knickers aside. "You hot one while you use the other."

Sunny nodded again.

"You see," the other went on, considering, "these pretties needs washin' first. Well, then I guess they need to dry. Now, 'bout starch? 'Most everything needs starch. At least, ther' always seems to be starch around washing-time. Y'see, I ain't wise to starch."

"Blamed if I am either," agreed Sunny. Then his more

practical mind asserted itself. "Say, starch kind o' fixes things hard, don't it?" he inquired.

"It sure does."

Scipio was trying to follow out his companion's train of thought.

Sunny suddenly sat down on the edge of the table and grinned triumphantly.

"Don't use it," he cried, with finality. "You need to remember kiddies is tender skinned, anyway. Starch 'll sure make 'em sore."

Scipio brightened.

"Why, yes," he agreed, with relief. "I didn't jest think about that. I'm a heap obliged, Sunny. You always seem to help me out."

The flush of pleasure which responded to the little man's tribute was quite distinguishable through the dirt on the loafer's face.

"Don't mention it," he said embarrassedly. "It's easy, two thinkin' together. 'Sides, I've tho't a heap 'bout things since—since I started in to fix your kiddies right. Y'see, it ain't easy."

"No, it just ain't. That is, y'see, I ain't grumbling," Scipio went on hurriedly, lest his meaning should be mistaken. "If you're stuck on kiddies, like me, it don't worry you nuthin'. Kind of makes it pleasant thinkin' how you can fix things fer 'em, don't it? But it sure ain't easy doing things just right. That's how I mean. An' don't it make you feel good when you do fix things right fer 'em? But I don't guess that comes often, though," he added, with a sigh. "Y'see, I'm kind of awkward. I ain't smart, like you or Bill."

"Oh, Bill's real smart," Sunny began. Then he checked himself. He was to keep Bill's name out of this matter, and he just remembered it in time. So he veered round quickly. "But I ain't smart," he declared. "Anything I know I got from a leddy friend. Y'see, women-folk knows a heap 'bout kiddies, which, I 'lows, is kind o' natural."

He fumbled in his pocket and drew out several sheets of paper. Arranging them carefully, he scanned the scrawling writing on them.

"Guess you're a scholar, so I won't need to read what I writ down here. Mebbe you'll be able to read it yourself. I sure 'low the spellin' ain't jest right, but you'll likely understand it. Y'see, the writin's clear, which is the chief thing. I was allus smart with a pen. Now, this yer is jest how our —my—leddy frien' reckons kids needs fixin'. It ain't reasonable to guess everything's down ther'. They're jest sort o' principles which you need to foller. Maybe they'll help you some. Guess if you foller them reg'lations your kids 'll sure grow proper."

He handed the papers across, and Scipio took them only too willingly. His thanks, his delight, was in the sudden lightening up of his whole face. But he did not offer a verbal expression of his feelings until he had read down the first page. Then he looked up with eyes that were almost moist with gratitude.

"Say," he began, "I can't never tell you how 'bliged I am, Sunny. These things have bothered me a whole heap. It's kind of you, Sunny, it is, sure. I'm that obliged I——"

"Say," broke in the loafer, "that sort o' talk sort o' worrits my brain. Cut it out." Then he grinned. "Y'see, I ain't used to thinkin' hard. It's mostly in the natur' o' work, an' —well, work an' me ain't been friends for years."

But Scipio was devouring the elaborated information Sunny had so laboriously set out. The loafer's picturesque mind had drawn heavily on its resources, and Birdie's principles had undergone a queer metamorphosis. So much so, that she would now have had difficulty in recognizing them. Sunny watched him reading with smiling interest. He was looking for those lights and shades which he hoped his illuminating phraseology would inspire. But Scipio was in deadly earnest. Phraseology meant nothing to him. It was the guidance he was looking for and devouring hungrily. At last he looked up, his pale eyes glowing.

"That's fine," he exclaimed, with such a wonderful relief that it was impossible to doubt his appreciation. Then he glanced round the room. He found some pins and promptly pinned the sheets on the cupboard door. Then he stood back and surveyed them. "You're a good friend, Sunny," he said earnestly. "Now I can't never make a mistake. There it

is all wrote ther'. An' when I ain't sure 'bout nothing, why, I only jest got to read what you wrote. I don't guess the kiddies can reach them there. Y'see, kiddies is queer 'bout things. Likely they'd get busy tearing those sheets right up, an' then wher'd I be? I'll start right in now on those reg'lations, an' you'll see how proper the kiddies 'll grow." He turned and held out his hand to his benefactor. "I'm 'bliged, Sunny; I sure can't never thank you enough."

Sunny disclaimed such a profusion of gratitude, but his dirty face shone with good-natured satisfaction as he gripped the little man's hand. And after discussing a few details and offering a few suggestions, which, since the acceptance of his efforts, seemed to trip off his tongue with an easy confidence which surprised even himself, he took his departure. And he left the hut with the final picture of Scipio, still studying his pages of regulations with the earnestness of a divinity student studying his Bible, filling his strongly imaginative brain. He felt good. He felt so good that he was sorry there was nothing more to be done until Wild Bill's return.

CHAPTER XVII

JESSIE'S LETTER

SCIPIO'S long day was almost over. The twins were in bed, and the little man was lounging for a few idle moments in the doorway of his hut. Just now an armistice in his conflict of thought was declared. For the moment the exigencies of his immediate duties left him floundering in the wilderness of his desolate heart at the mercy of the pain of memory. All day the claims of his children had upborne him. He had had little enough time to think of anything else, and thus, with his peculiar sense of duty militating in his favour, he had found strong support for the burden of his grief.

But now with thought and muscles relaxed, and the long night stretching out its black wings before him, the grey shadow had risen uppermost in his mind once more, and a weight of unutterable loneliness and depression bore down his spirit.

His faded eyes were staring out at the dazzling reflections of the setting sun upon the silvery crests of the distant mountain peaks. In every direction upon the horizon stretched the wonderful fire of sunset. Tongues of flame, steely, glowing, ruddy, shot up and athwart the picture in ever-changing hues before his unseeing eyes. It was all lost upon him. He stared mechanically, while his busy brain struggled amongst a tangle of memories and thought pictures. The shadows of his misfortune were hard besetting him.

Amidst his other troubles had come a fresh realization which filled him with something like panic. He had been forced to purchase stores for his household. To do so he had had to pay out the last of his fourth ten-dollar bill. His

exchequer was thus reduced to ten dollars. Ten dollars stood between him and starvation for his children. Nor could he see the smallest prospect of obtaining more. His imagination was stirred. He saw in fancy the spectre of starvation looming, hungrily stretching out its gaunt arms, clutching at his two helpless infants. He had no thought for himself. It did not occur to him that he, too, must starve. He only pictured the wasting of the children's round little bodies, he heard their weakly whimperings at the ravages of hunger's pangs. He saw the tottering gait as they moved about, unconscious of the trouble that was theirs, only knowing that they were hungry. Their requests for food rang in his ears, maddening him with the knowledge of his helplessness. He saw their wondering, wistful, uncomprehending eyes, so bright and beautiful now, growing bigger and bigger as their soft cheeks fell away. He——

He moved nervously. He shifted his position, vainly trying to rid himself of the haunting vision. But panic was upon him. Starvation—that was it. Starvation! God! how terrible was the thought. Starvation! And yet, before —before Jessie had gone he had been no better off. He had had only fifty dollars. But somehow it was all different then. She was there, and he had had confidence. Now—now he had none. Then she was there to manage, and he was free to work upon his claim.

Ah, his claim. That was it. The claim lay idle now with all its hidden wealth. How he wanted that wealth which he so believed to be there. No, he could not work his claim. The children could not be left alone all day. That was out of the question. They must be cared for. How—how?

His brain grew hot, and he broke out into a sweat. His head drooped forward until his unshaven chin rested upon his sunken chest. His eyes were lustreless, his two rough hands clenched nervously. Just for one weak moment he longed for forgetfulness. He longed to shut out those hideous visions with which he was pursued. He longed for peace, for rest from the dull aching of his poor torn heart. His courage was at a low ebb. Something of the nature of the hour had got hold of him. It was sundown. There was

the long black night between him and the morrow. He felt so helpless, so utterly incapable.

But his moment passed. He raised his head. He stood erect from the door casing. He planted his feet firmly, and his teeth gritted. The spirit of the man rose again. He must not give way. He would not. The children should not starve while there was food in the world. If he had no money, he had two strong hands and——

He started. A sudden noise behind him turned him facing about with bristling nerves. What was it? It sounded like the falling of a heavy weight. And yet it did not sound like anything big. The room was quite still, and looked, in the growing dusk, just the same as usual.

Suddenly the children leapt into his thought, and he started for the inner room. But he drew up short as he passed behind the table. A large stone was lying at his feet, and a folded paper was tied about it. He glanced round at the window and—understood.

He stooped and picked the missile up. Then he moved to the window and looked out. There was no one about. The evening shadows were rapidly deepening, but he was sure there was no one about. He turned back to the door where there was still sufficient light for his purposes. He sat down upon the sill with the stone in his hand. He was staring at the folded paper.

Yes, he understood. And instinctively he knew that the paper was to bring him fresh disaster. He knew it was a letter. And he knew whence it came.

At last he looked up. The mystery of the letter remained. It was there in his hand, waiting the severing of the string that held it, but somehow as yet he lacked the courage to read it. And so some moments passed. But at last he sighed and looked at it again. Then he reached round to his hip for his sheath-knife. The stone dropped to the ground, and with it the outer covering of the letter. With trembling fingers he unfolded the notepaper.

Yes, it was as he expected, as he knew, a letter from Jessie. And as he read it his heart cried out, and the warm blood in his veins seemed to turn to water. He longed for the woman whose hand had penned those words as he had

never longed for anything in his life. All the old wound was ruthlessly torn open, and it was as though a hot, searing iron had been thrust into its midst. He cared nothing for what she had done or was. He wanted her.

It was a letter full of pathetic pleading for the possession of Vada. It was not a demand. It was an appeal. An appeal to all that was his better nature. His honesty, his manliness, his simple unselfishness. It was a letter thrilling with the outpourings of a mother's heart craving for possession of the small warm life that she had been at such pains to bestow. It was the mother talking to him as he had never heard the wife and woman talk. There was a passion, a mother love in the hastily scrawled words that drove straight to the man's simple heart. One little paragraph alone set his whole body quivering with responsive emotion, and started the weak tears to his troubled eyes.

"Let me have her, Zip. Let me have her. Maybe I've lost my right, but I'm her mother. I brought her into the world, Zip. And what that means you can never understand. She's my flesh and blood. She's part of me. I gave her the life she's got. I'm her mother, Zip, and I'll go mad without her."

He read and re-read the letter. He would have read it a third time, but the tears blinded his eyes and he crushed it into his pocket. His heart yearned for her. It cried out to him in a great pity. It tore him so that he was drawn to words spoken aloud to express his feelings.

"Poor gal," he murmured. "Poor gal. Oh, my Jessie, what you done—what you done?"

He dashed a hand across his eyes to wipe away the mist of tears that obscured his vision and stood up. He was face to face with a situation that might well have confounded him. But here, where only his heart and not his head was appealed to, there was no confusion.

The woman had said he could not understand. She had referred to her motherhood. But Scipio was a man who could understand just that. He could understand with his heart, where his head might have failed him. He read into

the distracted woman's letter a meaning that perhaps no other man could have read into it. He read a human soul's agony at the severing of itself from all that belonged to its spiritual side. He read more than the loss of the woman's offspring. He read the despairing thought, perhaps unconscious, of a woman upon whom repentance has begun its work. And his simple heart went out to her, yearning, loving. He knew that her appeal was granted even before he acknowledged it to himself.

And strangely enough the coming of that letter—he did not pause to think how it had come—produced a miraculous change in him. His spirit rose thrilling with hope, and filled with a courage which, but a few moments before, seemed to have gone from him for ever. He did not understand, he did not pause to think. How could he? To him she was still his Jessie, the love and hope of his life. It was her hand that had penned that letter. It was her woman's heart appealing to his mercy.

"God in heaven," he cried, appealing to the blue vault above him in which the stars were beginning to appear. "I can't refuse her. I just can't. She wants her so—my poor, poor Jessie."

It was late in the evening when Scipio returned from the camp driving Minky's buckskin mule and ancient buckboard. His mind was made up. He would start out directly after breakfast on the morrow. He had resorted to a pitiful little subterfuge in borrowing Minky's buckboard. He had told the storekeeper that he had heard of a prospect some distance out, and he wanted to inspect it. He said he intended to take Vada with him, but wished to leave Jamie behind. Minky, as a member of the Trust, had promptly lent him the conveyance, and volunteered to have Jamie looked after down at the store by Birdie until he returned. So everything was made easy for him, and he came back to his home beyond the dumps with the first feeling of contentment he had experienced since his wife had deserted him.

Having made the old mule snug for the night on the leeward side of his house, he prepared to go to bed. There was just one remaining duty to perform, however, before he was

free to do so. He must set things ready for breakfast on the morrow. To this end he lit the lamp.

In five minutes his preparations were made, and, after one final look round, he passed over to the door to secure it. He stood for a moment drinking in the cool night air. Yes, he felt happier than he had done for days. Nor could he have said why. It was surely something to do with Jessie's letter, and yet the letter seemed to offer little enough for hope.

He was going to part with Vada, a thought which filled him with dismay, and yet there was hope in his heart. But then where the head might easily enough fail his heart had accepted responsibility. There was a note in the woman's appeal which struck a responsive chord in his own credulous heart, and somehow he felt that his parting with Vada was not to be for long. He felt that Jessie would eventually come back to him. He felt, though he did not put the thought into words, that no woman could feel as she did about her children, and be utterly dead to all the old affection that had brought them into the world.

He turned away at last. The air was good to breathe to-night, the world was good after all. Yes, it was better than he had thought it. There was much to be done to-morrow, so he would "turn in."

It was at that moment that something white lying at his feet caught his eye. Instantly he remembered it, and, stooping, picked it up. How strange it was the difference of his feelings as he lifted the outer wrapping of Jessie's letter now. There was something almost reverend in the way he handled the paper.

He closed the door and secured it, and went across to the lamp, where he stood looking down at the stained and dirty covering. He turned it over, his thoughts abstracted and busy with the woman who had folded it ready for its journey to him. Yes, she had folded it, she had sent it, she——

Suddenly his abstraction passed, and he bent over the disfiguring finger-marks. There was writing upon the paper, and the writing was not in Jessie's hand. He raised it closer to his eyes and began to read. And, with each word he

made out, his faculties became more and more angrily concentrated.

"You'll hand the kid over at once. I'll be on the Spawn City trail ten miles out. If you ain't there with the kid noon to-morrow there's going to be bad trouble.

"JAMES."

"James! James!" Scipio almost gasped the name. His pale eyes were hot and furious, and the blood surged to his brain.

He had forgotten James until now. He had forgotten the traitor responsible for his undoing. So much was Jessie in his life that James had counted for little when he thought of her. But now the scoundrel swept all other thoughts pell-mell out of his head. He was suddenly ablaze with a rage such as he had never before experienced. All that was human in him was in a state of fierce resentment. He hated James, and desired with all his small might to do him a bodily hurt. Yes, he could even delight in killing him. He would show him no mercy. He would revel in witnessing his death agonies. This man had not only wronged him. He had killed also the spiritual purity of the mother of his children. Oh, how he hated him. And now—now he had dared to threaten. He, stained to his very heart's core with villainy, had dared to interfere in a matter which concerned a mother's pure love for her children. The thought maddened him, and he crushed the paper in his hand and ground it under his heel.

He would not do it. He could not. He had forgotten the association to which he was sending the innocent Vada. No, no. Innocent little Vada. Jessie must do without her.

He flung himself into a chair and gave himself up to passionate thought. For two hours he sat there raging, half mad with his hideous feelings against James. But as the long hours slipped away he slowly calmed. His hatred remained for the man, but he kept it out of his silent struggle with himself. In spite of his first heated decision he was torn by a guiding instinct that left him faltering. He realized that his hatred of the man, and nothing else, was really

responsible for his negative attitude. And this was surely wrong. What he must really consider was the welfare of Vada, and—Jessie. The whole thing was so difficult, so utterly beyond him. He was drawn this way and that, struggling with a brain that he knew to be incompetent. But in the end it was again his heart that was victorious. Again his heart would take no denial.

Confused, weary, utterly at a loss to finally decide, he drew out Jessie's letter again. He read it. And like a cloud his confusion dispersed and his mind became clear. His hatred of James was thrust once more into the background. Jessie's salvation depended on Vada's going. Vada must go.

He sighed as he rose from his chair and blew out the lamp.

"Maybe I'm wrong," he murmured, passing into the bedroom. "Maybe. Well, I guess God'll have to judge me, and—He knows."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE ROAD

WILD BILL had many things to think of on his way back to Suffering Creek. He was a tremendously alert-minded man at all times, so alert-minded that at no time was he given to vain imaginings, and to be alone for long together chafed and irritated him to a degree. His life was something more than practicality; it was vigour in an extreme sense. He must be doing; he must be going ahead. And it mattered very little to him whether he was using vigour of mind or body. Just now he was using the former to a purpose. Possibilities and scheming flashed through his head in such swift succession as to be enough to dazzle a man of lesser mental calibre.

The expressed object of his visit to Spawn City was only one of several purposes he had in hand. And though he turned up at the principal hotel at the psychological moment when he could drop into the big game of poker he had promised himself, and though at that game he helped himself, with all the calm amiability in the world, to several thousand dollars of the "rich guys'" money, the rest of his visit to the silver city was spent in moving about amongst the lower haunts where congregated the human jackals which hunt on the outskirts of such places.

And in these places he met many friends and acquaintances with whom he fraternized for the time being. And his sojourn cost him a good many dollars, dollars which he shed unstintingly, even without counting. Nor was he the man to part with his money in this casual manner without obtaining adequate return, and yet all he had to show as a result of his expedition was a word of information here and there, a suggestion or two which would scarcely have revealed to the outsider the interest which they held for him. Yet he

seemed satisfied. He seemed very well satisfied indeed, and his reckless spirit warmed as he progressed in his peregrinations.

Then, too, he "dined" the sheriff of the county at the only restaurant worth while. He spent more than two hours in this man's company, and his wine bill was in due proportion to the hardy official's almost unlimited capacity for liquid refreshment. Yet even to the most interested his purpose would have needed much explanation. He asked so few questions. He seemed to lead the conversation in no particular direction. He simply allowed talk to drift whither it would. And somehow it always seemed to drift whither he most desired it.

Yes, his movements were quite curious during his visit, and yet they were commonplace enough to suggest nothing of the depth of subtlety which really actuated him. There was even an absurd moment which found him in a candy-store purchasing several pounds of the most sickly candy he could buy in so rough a place as the new silver town.

However, the time came for him at last to get out on the road again for home. And, having prepared his team for the journey, he hitched them up to his spring-cart himself, paid his bill, and, with a flourish of his whip, and a swagger which only a team of six such magnificent horses as he possessed could give him, left the hotel at a gallop, the steely muscles of his arms controlling his fiery children as easily as the harsh voice of a northern half-breed controls a racing dog-train.

And on the journey home his thoughts were never idle for a moment. So busy were they that the delicious calm of the night, the wonders of the following dawn, the glory of a magnificent sunrise over a green world of mountain, valley and plain, were quite lost to his unpoetic soul. The only things which seemed able to distract his concentrated thoughts were the fiercely buzzing mosquitoes, and these he cursed with whole-hearted enthusiasm which embraced a perfect vocabulary of lurid blasphemy.

Twice on the journey he halted and unhitched his horses for feed and drink and a roll. But the delays were short, and his vigorous methods gave them but short respite. He cared for his equine friends with all his might, and he drove them

in a similar manner. This was the man. A life on a bed of roses would not have been too good for his horses, but if he so needed it they would have to repay him by driving over a red-hot trail.

Now the home stretch lay before him, some twenty miles through a wonderful broken country, all spruce and pine forests, crag and valley, threaded by a white hard trail which wound its way amidst Nature's chaos in a manner similar to that in which a mountain stream cuts its course, percolating along the path of the least resistance.

Through this splendid country the untiring team travelled, hauling their feather-weight burden as though there was nothing more joyous in life. In spite of the length of the journey the gambler had to keep a tight pressure on the reins, or the willing beasts would, at any moment, have broken into a headlong gallop. Their barn lay ahead of them, and their master sat behind them. What more could they want?

Up a sharp incline, and the race down the corresponding decline. The wide stretch of valley bottom, and again a steep ascent. There was no slackening of gait, scarcely a hard breath. Only the gush of eager nostrils in the bright morning air of the mountains. Now along a forest-bounded stretch of level trail, winding, and full of protruding tree-stumps and roots. There was no stumbling. The sure-footed thoroughbreds cleared each obstruction with mechanical precision, and only the spring-cart bore the burden of impact.

On, up out of the darkened valley to a higher level above, where the high hills sloped away upwards, admitting the dazzling daylight so that the whole scene was lit to a perfect radiance, and the nip of mountain air filled the lungs with an invigorating tonic.

At last the traveller dropped down into the wide valley, in the midst of which he first came into touch with the higher reaches of Suffering Creek. Here it flowed a sluggish, turgid stream, so sullen, so heavy. It was narrow, and at points curiously black in tone. There was none of the freshness, the rushing, tumultuous flow of a mountain torrent about it here. Its banks were marshy with a wide spread of oozy soil, and miry reeds grew in abundance. The trail cut well away from the bed of the creek, mounting the higher land where

the soil, in curious contrast, was sandy, and the surface deep in a silvery dust. To an observer the curiosity of the contrast must have been striking, but Wild Bill was not in an observant mood. He was busy with his horses—and his thoughts.

He was travelling now in a cloud of dust. And it was this, no doubt, which accounted for the fact that he did not see a buckboard drawn by an aged mule until he heard a shout, and his horses swung off the trail of their own accord. Quick as lightning he drew them up with a violent curse.

"What in hell——!" he roared. But he broke off suddenly as the dust began to clear, and he saw the yellow-headed figure of Scipio seated in the buckboard, with Vada beside him, just abreast of him.

"Mackinaw!" he cried. "What you doin' out here?"

So startled was the gambler at the unexpected vision that he made no attempt to even guess at Scipio's purpose. He put his question without another thought behind it.

Scipio, whose mule had jumped at the opportunity of discontinuing its laborious effort, and was already reaching out at the grass lining the trail, passed a hand across his brow before answering. It was as though he were trying to fix in his mind the reason of his own presence there.

"Why," he said hesitatingly, "why, I'm out after a—a prospect I heard tell of. Want to get a peek at it."

The latter was said with more assurance, and he smiled vaguely into his friend's face.

But Bill had gathered his scattered wits, and had had time to think. He nodded at little Vada, who was interestedly staring at the satin coats of his horses.

"An' you takin' her out to help you locate it?" he inquired, with a raising of his shaggy brows.

"Not just that," Scipio responded uncomfortably. He found it curiously difficult to lie with Bill's steady eyes fixed on him. "Y'see—— Say, am I near ten miles out from the camp?"

"Not by three miles." Bill was watching him intently. He saw the pale eyes turn away and glance half fearfully along the trail. Then they suddenly came back, and Scipio gazed at the child beside him. He sighed and lifted his reins.

"Guess I'll get on, then," he said in the dogged tone of a man who has made up his mind to an unpleasant task.

But Bill had no intention of letting him go yet. He sat back in his seat, his hand holding his reins loosely in his lap.

"That wher' your prospect is?" he inquired casually.

Scipio nodded. He could not bring himself to frame any further aggravation of the lie.

"Wher' did you hear of the prospect?" Bill demanded shrewdly.

"I——"

But little Vada broke in. Her interest had been diverted by the word prospect.

"Wot's 'prospect'?" she demanded.

Bill laughed without any change of expression.

"'Prospect' is wher' you *expect* to find gold," he explained carefully.

The child's eyes widened, and she was about to speak. Then she hesitated, but finally she proceeded.

"That ain't wot we're goin' for," she said simply. "Poppa's goin' to take me wher' momma is. I'm goin' to momma, an' she's ever so far away. Pop told me. Jamie's goin' to stay with him, an' I'm goin' to stay with momma, an'—an'—I want Jamie to come too." Tears suddenly crowded her eyes, and slowly rolled down her sunburned cheeks.

Just for a moment neither man spoke. Bill's fierce eyes were curiously alight, and they were sternly fixed on the averted face of the father. At last Scipio turned towards him; and with his first words he showed his relief that further lying was out of the question.

"I forgot—somehow—she knew. Y'see——"

But Bill, who had just bitten off a fresh chew of tobacco, gave him no chance to continue.

"Say," he interrupted him, "ther's lies I hate, an' ther's lies that don't make no odds. You've lied in a way I hate. You've lied 'cos you had to lie, knowin' you was doin' wrong. If you hadn't know'd you was doin' wrong you wouldn't have needed to lie—sure. Say, you're not only handin' over that kiddie to her mother, you're handin' her over to that

feller. Now, get to it an' tell me things. An'—you needn't to lie any."

Scipio hung his head. These words coming from Wild Bill suddenly put an entirely different aspect upon his action. He saw something of the horror he was committing as Bill saw it. He was seeing through another man's eyes now, where before he had only seen through his own simple heart, torn by the emotions his Jessie's letter had inspired.

He fumbled in his pocket and drew out his wife's letter. He looked at it, his whole heart in his eyes. Then he reached out and passed it to the gambler.

"She's got to have her," he said, with a touch of his native obstinacy and conviction. "She's her mother. I haven't a right to keep her. I——"

But Bill silenced him without ceremony.

"Don't yap," he cried. "How ken I read this yer muck with you throwin' hot air?"

Scipio desisted, and sat staring vacantly at the long ears of Minky's mule. He was gazing on a mental picture of Jessie as he considered she must have looked when writing that letter. He saw her distress in her beautiful eyes. There were probably tears in her eyes, too, and the thought hurt him and made him shrink from it. He felt that her poor heart must have been breaking when she had written. Perhaps James had been cruel to her. Yes, he was sure to have been cruel to her. Such a blackguard as he was sure to be cruel to women-folk. No doubt she was longing to escape from him. She was sure to be. She would never have willingly gone away——

"Tosh!" cried Bill. And Scipio found the letter thrust out for him to take back.

"Eh?"

"I said 'tosh!'" replied the gambler. "How'd you get that letter?"

"It was flung in through the window. It was tied to a stone."

"Yes?"

"There was a wrappin' to it." Then Scipio's eyes began to sparkle at the recollection. "It was wrote on by the feller James," he went on in a low voice.

Then suddenly he turned, and his whole manner partook of an impotent heat.

"He'd wrote I was to hand her, Vada, over to him ten miles out on this trail—or there'd be trouble."

Wild Bill stirred and shifted his seat with a fierce dash of irritation. His face was stern and his black eyes blazing. He spat out his chew of tobacco.

"An' you was scared to death, like some silly skippin' sheep. You hadn't bowel enough to tell him to go to hell. You felt like handin' him any other old thing you'd got—'Here, go on, help yourself.'" He flung out his arms to illustrate his meaning. "'You got my wife; here's my kiddies. If you need anything else, you can sure get my claim. Guess my shack 'll make you an elegant summer palace.' Gee!"

The gambler's scorn was withering, and with each burst of it he flourished his arms as though handing out possessions to an imaginary James. And every word he spoke smote Scipio, goading him and lashing up the hatred which burnt deep down in his heart for the man who had ruined his life.

But the little man's thought of Jessie was not so easily set aside, and he jumped to defend himself.

"You don't understand——" he began. But the other cut him short with a storm of scathing anger.

"No, I sure don't understand," he cried, "I don't. I sure don't. Guess I'm on'y jest a man. I ain't no sort o' bum angel, nor sanctimonious sky-bustin' hymn-smiter. I'm on'y a man. An' I kind o' thank them as is responsible that I ain't nuthin' else. Say"—his piercing eyes seemed to bore their way right down to the little man's heart like red-hot needles—"I ain't got a word to say to you but you orter be herdin' wi' a crowd o' mangy gophers. Tchah! A crowd o' maggots 'ud cut you off'n their visitin' list in a diseased carkis. Here's a feller robs you in the meanest way a man ken be robbed, an' you're yearnin' to hand him more—a low-down cur of a stage-robber, a cattle-thief, the lowest down bum ever created—an' you'd hand over this pore innercent little kiddie to him. Was there ever sech a white-livered sucker? Say, you're responsible fer that pore little gal's life, you're respon-

sible fer her innercent soul, an' you'd hand her over to James, like the worstest cur in creation. Say, I ain't got words to tell you what you are. You're a white-livered bum that even hell won't give room to. You're——"

"Here, hold on," cried Scipio, turning, with his pale eyes mildly blazing. "You're wrong, all wrong. I ain't doing it because I'm scared of James. I don't care nothing for his threats. I'm scared of no man—not even you. See? My Jessie's callin' for her gal—my Jessie! Do you know what that means to me? No, of course you don't. You don't know my Jessie. You ain't never loved a wife like my Jessie. You ain't never felt what a kiddie is to its mother. You can't see as I can see. This little gal," he went on, tenderly laying an arm about Vada's small shoulders, "will, maybe, save my pore Jessie. That pore gal has hit the wrong trail, an'—an' I'd sacrifice everything in the world to save her. I'd—I'd sell my own soul. I'd give it to—save her."

Scipio looked fearlessly into the gambler's eyes. His pale cheeks were lit by a hectic flush of intense feeling. There was a light in his eyes of such honesty and devotion that the other lowered his. He could not look upon it unmoved.

Bill sat back, for once in his life disconcerted. All his righteous indignation was gone out of him. He was confronted with a spectacle such as, in his chequered career, he had never before been brought into contact with. It was the meeting of two strangely dissimilar, yet perfectly human, forces. Each was fighting for what he knew to be right. Each was speaking from the bottom of a heart inspired by his sense of human right and loyalty. While the gambler, without subtlety of emotion, saw only with a sense of human justice, with a hatred of the man who had so wronged this one, with a desire to thwart him at every turn, the other possessed a breadth of feeling sufficient to put out of his thoughts all recollection of his personal wrong, if only he could help the woman he loved.

It was a meeting of forces widely different, yet each in its way thrilling with a wonderful honesty of purpose. And, curiously enough, the purpose of Scipio, who lacked so much of the other's intellect and force, became, in a measure, the

dominating factor. It took hold of the gambler, and stirred him as he had never been stirred before.

Suddenly Wild Bill leant forward. Once more those swift, relentless eyes focused and compelled the others.

"Zip," he said in a tone that was strangely thrilling, "maybe I didn't get all you felt—all you got in that tow-head of yours. That bein' so, guess I owe you amends. But I'm goin' to ast you to sure fergit that gal's letter—fer awhiles. I'm goin' to ast you to turn that bussock-headed mule you're drivin' right around, and hit back for the Creek. You do this, Zip, an' I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do. I ain't no sentimental slob. I ain't got the makin's in me of even a store-mussed angel. See? But if you do this I swar to you right here I'm goin' to see your Jessie right. I swar to you I'll rid her of this 'Lord' James, an' it'll jest be up to you to do the rest. Git me?"

Scipio took a breath that was something like a gasp.

"You'll—you'll help me get her back?" he breathed, with a glow of hope which almost shocked his companion.

"I'm not promisin' that," said Bill quickly. "That's sure up to you. But I give it you right here, I'll—shift this doggone skunk out of your way."

Scipi made no verbal reply. Just for a moment he looked into the gimlet eyes of the other. He saw the iron purpose there. He saw the stern, unyielding compression of the lean, muscular jaws. There was something tremendous in the suggestion of power lying behind this ruffian's exterior. He turned away and gathered up the old mule's reins.

"You're allus been friendly to me, Bill, so——"

He pulled off the trail and turned the mule's head in the direction of home. And the rest of the gambler's journey was done in the wake of Minky's buckboard.

CHAPTER XIX

A FINANCIAL TRANSACTION

Scipio was washing clothes down at the creek. So much had happened to him that day, so many and various had been the emotions through which he had passed, that there was only one thing left him to do. He must work. He dared not sit down and think. Hard physical labour was what he required. And the rubbing out of the children's small clothes, and his own somewhat tattered garments, became a sort of soothing drug which quietened his troubled mind, and lulled his nerves into a temporary quiescence. The children were with him, playing unconcernedly upon the muddy banks of the creek, with all the usual childish zest for anything so deliciously enticing and soft as liquid river mud.

Vada had forgotten her journey of that morning, it had quite passed out of her little head in the usual way of such trifling unpleasantnesses which go so frequently to make up the tally of childhood's days. Jamie had no understanding of it. His Vada was with him again, hectoring, guiding him as was her wont, and, in his babyish way, he was satisfied.

As for Scipio he gave no sign of anything. He was concentrating all his mental energies on the work in hand, thus endeavouring to shut out memory which possessed nothing but pain for him. Every now and then a quick, sidelong glance in the children's direction kept him informed of their doings and safety, otherwise his eyes were rarely raised from the iron bath, filled to the brim with its frothing suds.

Striding down the slope from the hut where he had come in search of Scipio, this was the picture Wild Bill discovered. The little yellow-headed man was standing in the midst of a small clearing in the bushes, a clearing long since made for the purposes of his wife's weekly wash. His back was

turned, and his small figure was bowed over the tub in front of him. Every bush around him was decorated with clothes laid out on their leafy surfaces, where the sun could best operate its hygienic drying process. He saw the bobbing heads of the mudlarking children a few yards away where the low cut-bank hid their small bodies from view. And somehow an unusual pity stirred his hard, world-worn heart.

And yet no one could have called him a sentimental man. At least, no one who knew his method of life. How would it be possible to gild a man with humane leanings who would sit in to a game at poker, and, if chance came his way, take from any opponent his last cent of money, even if he knew that a wife and children would be reduced to starvation thereby? How could a kindliness of purpose be read into the acts of a man who would have no scruple in taking life, under provocation, without the least mercy or qualm of conscience? He displayed no tenderness, he hated what he considered such weakness. It was his studied practice to avoid showing consideration for others, and he would have bitterly resented those who considered him. He preferred that his attitude towards the world should be one of unyielding selfishness. Such was the game of life as he understood it.

Yes, honestly enough, he hated sentiment, and for this very reason he cursed himself bitterly that such a feeling as he now experienced should so disturb him. He hurried down the slope a shade quicker than there was any necessity for. And it was as though he were endeavouring to outstrip the feelings which pursued him.

Scipio heard him coming, and glanced round quickly. When he beheld his visitor he nodded a greeting and continued his work. In his heart was a curious feeling towards the gambler. He could not have described it. It was too complicated. He liked Wild Bill. He felt that for some indefinite reason he was his friend. Yet he resented him, too. He did not know he resented him. Only he felt that this man dominated him, and he was forced to obey him against his will. At sight of him his mind went back to the events of that morning. He thought of Bill's promise,

and a curious excitement stirred within him. He wondered now what this visit portended.

For once the gambler did not display his usual readiness. He did not speak for some moments, but took up a position whence he could see the children at their play, and best watch the little washerman, on whom he intended to thrust a proposition that had been revolving in his mind some time. He chewed his tobacco steadily, while his expression went through many changes. At last he drew his shaggy brows together and eyed his victim with shrewd suspicion.

"Say, you're kind o' smart, ain't you?" he demanded harshly.

The other looked up with a start, and his mildly inquiring glance should have convinced the most sceptical to the contrary. But apparently it had no such effect on his visitor.

"I'd never ha' tho't it," Bill went on coldly. "To look at you one 'ud sure think you was that simple a babby could fool you. Howsum," he sighed, "I don't guess you ken never rightly tell."

A flush began to warm Scipio's cheeks. He couldn't understand. He wondered hard, vainly endeavouring to grasp wherein he had offended.

"I—I don't get you," he said, in a bewildered fashion, dropping the garment he was washing back into the soap-suds.

Bill's expression underwent another change as he caught at the words.

"You don't get me?" he said ironically. "You don't get me?" Then he shrugged as though he was not angry, but merely deplored the others unsuspected cunning. "You can't strike it rich an' guess you're goin' to blind folks. I'd say it needs every sort of a man to do that around these parts."

Scipio gasped. He had no other feeling than blank astonishment.

"I ain't struck it rich," he protested.

And his denial was received with a forced peal of laughter.

"Say, you're a heap shrewd," cried Bill, when his laugh had subsided. "I'd say you're jest about slick. Gee! Wal, I can't blame you any fer holdin' your face shut. Ther's a mint o' dollars ken drop out of a feller's mouth through

an unnatteral openin'. Ef you'd got busy gassin', it's a million dollar bet all the folks around this lay-out 'ud be chasin' you clear to death. Say, it's right, though? There's chunks of it stickin' right out, fine, yaller, dandy gold. An' the quartz bank cuttin' down wider an' wider?"

But Scipio shook his head. His bewilderment had gone, and in place of it was sad conviction.

"Not yet," he said. "Not yet. I ain't seen it, anyway. I sure think there's gold in plenty on that claim. I know there is," he added, with unusual force, his pulses beginning to quicken, and a sudden hope stirring. Bill's accusation was aiding the effect. "But it ain't on the surface. It sure ain't."

He stood wondering, all his washing forgotten in this newly raised hope so subtly stirred by the gambler. Had some one else discovered what he had missed for so long. He hadn't been near his claim for some days. Had some one——?

"Who says about the gold?" he demanded, with sudden inspiration.

"The folks."

The gambler passed the point without committing himself.

Scipio shook his head, puzzling. Something must surely have transpired, and yet——

"You got me beat, Bill. You have, sure." The smile that accompanied his words was good to see. But somehow the gambler found the far horizon of more interest just then.

"You're a wide one all right," he said thoughtfully. "There's no gettin' upsides with you. Give me them quiet, simple sort o' fellers every time. They got the gas machine beat so far you couldn't locate him with a forty-foot microscope. Gee!" He chuckled, and turned again to contemplate his companion, much as he would a newly discovered wonder of the world.

But poor Scipio was really becoming distressed. He hoped, merely because the other forced him to hope, by his own evident sincerity. But the charge of shrewdness, of conspiring to keep a secret he had never possessed, worried him.

"I take my oath I don't know a thing, Bill," he declared

earnestly. "I sure don't. You've got to believe me, because I can't say more. I seen my claim days back, an' I hadn't a colour. I ain't seen it since. That's fact."

It was strange to see how readily the disbelief died out of the other's face. It was almost magical. It was as though his previous expression had been nothing but acting and his fresh attitude the result of studied preparation.

"Well, Zip," he said seriously, almost dejectedly, "if you put it that way, I sure got to b'lieve you. But it's queer. It sure is There's folks ready to swear ther's rich gold on your claim, an' I'll tell you right here I come along to git in on it. Y'see, I'm a bizness man, an' I don't figger to git a crop o' weeds growin' around my feet. I sez to myself, I sez, directly I heerd tell, 'Here's Zip with an elegant patch o' pay dirt, an' here am I with a wad of bills handy, which I'd sure like to turn over some.' Then I sez—I want you to understand jest how I thought—I sez, 'Mebbe I've kind o' bin useful to Zip. Helped him out some, when he was fixed awkward.' You see, it ain't my way to do things for nothing. An' I do allow I bin useful to you. Well, I thought o' these things, so I come along right smart to get in on the plum. Sez I, 'Zip, bein' under obligation to me some, mebbe he'll let me buy haf share in his claim,' me handin' him a thousand dollars. It 'ud be a spot cash deal, an' me puttin' in a feller to work—*an'* see things right fer *me*—why, I guess there'd be no chance o' you gettin' gay —an' fakin' the output. See? I don't guess you're on the crook, but in bizness a feller don't take chances. Y'see I'm pretty bright when it gits to bizness, an', anyway, I don't stand fer no play o' that kind. Get me?"

The gambler's manner was wholly severe as he explained his proposition, and impressed his views of business. Scipio listened without the slightest umbrage. He saw nothing wrong, nothing unfriendly in the precautions the other had intended to take. As a matter of fact, the one thing that concerned him was the disappointment he must cause him.

"There's nothing like straight talk, Bill," he said cordially. "I allus like straight talk. You kind of know just where you are then. There's not a doubt you've been real good

to me," he went on, with evident feeling, "and I'll never be able to forget it—never. I tell you right here, if there was anything in the world I could do in return, I'd do it."

He smiled quaintly and pushed his stubby fingers through his sparse hair in his most helpless manner.

"If there was gold on my claim, I'd let you in all you need, and I wouldn't want your dollars. Dollars? No, Bill, I don't want dollars for doing anything for you. I sure don't. I mean that. Maybe you'll understand, y'see I'm not a business man—never was."

The gambler averted his eyes. He could not look into the other's face so shining with honesty and gratitude.

"But there ain't no gold found on that claim yet," Scipio went on. "Leastways, not that I know of, so what's the use deceivin' you? An' dollars, why, there's no question of 'em between us. You can stand in haf my claim, Bill, an' welcome, but you ain't going to pay me dollars for gold that ain't been found. Yes, you're sure welcome to haf my claim, an' you ken set a man working for you. I'll not say but I'll be glad of the help. But don't make no mistake, gold ain't been found, as far as I know, an' there may be none there, so I'd be glad if you don't risk a lot of dollars in the work."

The gambler felt mean as he listened to the quiet words ringing with such simple honesty. Time and again his beady eyes lifted to the steady blue ones, only to drop quickly before their fearless sincerity. He stirred irritably, and a hot impatience with himself drove him so that the moment Scipio finished speaking he broke out at once.

"Here," he cried, without the least gentleness, "you're talkin' a heap o' foolishness. I'm a bizness man offerin' a bizness proposition. I don't want nuthin' given. I'm out to make a deal. You say there's no gold there. Wal, I say there sure is. That bein' so I'd be a low down skunk takin' haf your claim fer nix, jest because you guess you owe me things—which I 'low you sure do, speakin' plain. I got a thousand dollars right here,"—he pulled out a packet of bills from his hip pocket, and held them up for the other's inspection—"an' them dollars says ther's gold on your claim. An' I'm yearnin' to touch haf that gold. But I'm takin' no

chances. I want it all wrote down reg'lar so folks can't say I sneaked around you, an' got in for nix. Gee, I'd look mighty small if you turned around on me afterwards. No, sir, you don't get me that way. I'm only soft around my teeth. If you're the man I take you for, if you're honest as you're guessin', if you feel you want to pay me fer anything I done for you, why, cut the gas an' take my dollars, an' I'll get the papers made out by a Spawn City lawyer. They're all that crooked they couldn't walk a chalk-line, but I guess they know how to bind a feller good an' tight, an' I'll see they bind you up so ther' won't be no room for fool tricks. That's bizness."

Scipio shook his head. And Bill flushed angrily.

"It ain't square," the little man protested. "Maybe you'll lose your money."

"That's up to me," the gambler began fiercely. Then he checked himself, and suddenly became quite grieved. "Wal, Zip, I wouldn't ha' b'lieved it. I sure wouldn't. But ther' —life's jest self. It's all self. You're like all the rest. I've been chasin' a patch o' good pay dirt ever since I bin around Sufferin' Creek, an' it's only now I've found one to suit me. I sure thought you'd let me in on it. I sure did. Howsum, you won't. You want it all yourself. Wal, go ahead. An' you needn't worry what I told you this morning. My word goes every time. This ain't going to make no difference. I'm not goin' to squeal on that jest because you won't 'blige me."

He made as though to return his dollars to his pocket. He had turned away, but his shrewd eyes held his companion in their focus. He saw the flush of shame on Scipio's face. He saw him open his mouth to speak. Then he saw it shut as he left his tub and came towards him. Bill waited, his cunning telling him to keep up his pretence. Scipio did not pause till he laid a hand on his arm, and his mild eyes were looking up into his keen, hard face.

"Bill," he said, "you can have haf my claim and—and I'll take your dollars. I jest didn't guess I was bein' selfish about it—I didn't, truth. I was thinkin' o' you. I was thinkin' you might lose your bills. Y'see, I haven't had the best of luck—I——"

But the gambler's face was a study as he pushed his hand off and turned on him. There was a fine struggle going on in his manner between the harshness he wished to display and the glad triumph he really felt.

"Don't slob," he cried. "Here's the bills. Stuff 'em right down in your dip. Haf that claim is mine, an' I'll have the papers wrote reg'lar. I didn't think you was mean, an' I'm glad you ain't."

Scipio took the money reluctantly enough, and pushed it into his pocket with a sigh. But Bill had had enough of the matter. He turned to go, moving hastily. Then, of a sudden, he remembered. Thrusting his hand into a side pocket of his jacket he produced a paper parcel.

"Say, Zip, I come nigh forgettin'," he cried cheerfully. "The hash-slinger down at Minky's ast me to hand you this. It's for the kiddies. It's candy. I'd say she's sweet on your kiddies. She said I wasn't to let you know she'd sent 'em. So you ken jest kep your face closed. So long."

He hurried away like a man ashamed. Scipio had such a way of looking into his eyes. But once out of sight he slackened his pace. And presently a smile crept into his small eyes, that set them twinkling.

"Guess, I'm every kind of a fule," he muttered. "A thousand dollars! Gee! An' ther' ain't gold within a mile of the doggone claim—'cep' when Zip's ther'," he added thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XX

HOW THE TRUST BOUGHT MEDICINE

WILD BILL ate his supper that evening because it was his custom to do so. He had no inclination for it, and it gave him no enjoyment. He treated the matter much as he would have treated the stoking of a stove on a winter's night. So long as he was filled up he cared little for the class of the fuel.

Birdie waited on him with an attention and care such as she never bestowed upon any other boarder at the store, and the look in her bright eyes as she forestalled his wishes, compared with the air with which she executed the harshly delivered orders of the rest of the men, was quite sufficient to enlighten the casual onlooker as to the state of her romantic heart. But her blandishments were quite lost upon her hero. He treated her with much the same sort of indifference he might have displayed towards one of the camp dogs.

To-night, particularly, nothing she could do or say seemed to give him the least satisfaction. He ignored her as he ignored all the rest of the boarders, and devoured his meal in absolute silence—in so far as any speech went—wrapt in an impenetrable moroseness which had a damping effect upon the entire company.

Truth to tell, he was obsessed with his thoughts and feelings against the man James. With every passing day his resentment against him piled up, till now he could think of nothing much else but a possible way to dislodge him from the pinnacle of his local notoriety, and so rid the district of the threat of his presence.

How much of this feeling was purely personal, inspired by the natural antagonism of a strong, even violent, nature

against a man whose very existence was an everlasting challenge to him, and how far it was the result of an unadmitted sympathy for Scipio, it would have been impossible to tell in a man like Wild Bill. Reason was not in such things with him. He never sought reasons where his feelings were concerned. James must go. And so his whole mind and force was given up to a search for adequate means to accomplish his purpose.

The problem was not easy. And when things were not easy to him, Bill's temper invariably suffered. Besides, scheming was never pleasant to him. He was so essentially a man of action. An open battle appealed to him as nothing else in the world appealed to him. Force of arms—that was his conception of the settlement of human differences.

He admitted to himself that the events of the day had stirred his "bile." He felt that he must hit out to ease himself, and the one direction to hit out in which would have given him any satisfaction was not yet available. So he brooded on, a smouldering volcano which his acquaintances avoided with a care inspired by past experience.

But his mood was bound to find an outlet somehow. It is always so. If the opportunity does not come naturally, ill-temper will make one. It was this way with the gambler. A devilish impulse caught him just as supper was nearing its finish.

The thought occurred with the entrance of Sandy Joyce, who took the empty place at the table on Bill's right. Birdie was hovering near, and, as Sandy took his seat, she suddenly dumped a fresh cup of coffee before the gambler. She giggled coyly as the cup clattered on the bare table.

"I ain't set sugar in it, Bill," she said sweetly, and reached towards the sugar-bowl.

But the man pushed her arm roughly aside.

"Oh, skip!" he cried. "You make me sick."

His bearishness in no way disconcerted the girl. She persisted, and dropped two spoonfuls of granulated sugar into his cup.

"Some folks needs sugar," she remarked, with another giggle, as she moved away. And somehow it was Bill who had suffered loss of dignity.

This only helped to aggravate his mood, and he turned his small eyes sharply on Sandy.

"I'm needin' some one to work a claim fer me," he said in a voice intended to reach every ear, and as he spoke a curious look came into his eyes. It was half a grin, half a challenge, and wholly meant mischief.

The effect was exactly as he had calculated. The entire attention of the room was on him at once, and he warmed as he waited for Sandy's reply.

"You—you got a claim?" the widower inquired blankly.

Bill licked his lips after devouring a mouthful of pie.

"An' why in hell not?" he retorted.

Before Sandy could gather an adequate reply, the matter was taken up by a young miner further down the table.

"Wher' you got it, Bill?" he inquired, with genuine interest.

The gambler swallowed another mouthful of pie, and rammed the rim of crust into his cheek with his thumb, and leisurely devoured it before replying.

"I don't see that my claim has anything to do wi' the company present," he said at last, with a dangerous look in his half-grinning eyes. "But, seein' Mr. Joe Brand is kind o' curious, guess he may as well know first as last."

"I didn't mean no offence, Bill," apologized the miner, flushing and speaking hurriedly.

Bill promptly became sarcastic.

"Course you didn't. Folks buttin' in never don't mean no offence. Howsum, guess my claim's on the banks o' Sufferin' Creek. Maybe you feel better now?" He glared down the table, but finally turned again to Sandy. "You ain't pertickler busy 'bout now, so—ther's thirty dollars a week says you ken hev the job. An' I'll give you a percentage o' the gold you wash up," he added dryly. "You on?"

Sandy nodded. He didn't quite understand his friend's game. This was the first he had heard of Bill having acquired a claim—and on the river, too. There was only one other man on the river, and—well, Zip's claim was the joke of the camp.

He had just formulated a question in his mind, when the words were taken out of his mouth by a heavy-faced prospector further down the table.

"Wher' 'bouts on the Creek, Bill?" he inquired.

The gambler eyed him intently.

"Quite a piece up," he said shortly.

A half-smile spread over the prospector's face.

"Not nigh—Zip's?" he suggested.

The half-grin in Bill's eyes was becoming more savage.

"Yep—an' I bought it."

His information increased the interest with a bound. Every man there knew, or believed, that Zip's claim was the only one on the Creek.

"I didn't know there was any other but Zip's," said Joe Brand, his interest outrunning his discretion.

"Ah, you buttin' in again," sneered Bill. "Guess you know right, too. Ther' ain't."

It was curious to glance down at the double row of faces lining the table and note the perplexity which suddenly gathered on them. Bill saw it and enjoyed it. It suited his mood. Finally the heavy-faced prospector blurted out the question that was in everybody's mind.

"You—you bought Zip's claim?" he asked incredulously.

"Haf of it. Me an' Zip's partners. You got anything to say?"

Bill's words rapped out with biting force, and Sandy, knowing the man, waited, solemn-eyed. Just for one moment astonishment held his audience breathless. Then some one sniggered, and it became the cue for an instantaneous and general guffaw of derision. Every face was wreathed in a broad grin. The humour of this thing was too much. Zip's claim! Bill, the keen, unscrupulous gambler, had fallen for Zip's mud-hole on the banks of Suffering Creek!

Bill waited. The laugh was what he needed, so he waited till it died out. As it did so he kicked back his chair and stood up, his tall figure and hard face a picture of cold challenge.

"You're that merry, folks," he said, his teeth clipping each word, "that maybe some o' you got something to say. I'd like to hear it. No?" as he waited. But no one seemed anxious to comment. "Joe Brand kind o' seems fond o' buttin' in—mebbe he'll oblige."

But the young miner was not to be drawn. Bill shrugged his lean shoulders, his fierce eyes alight with a dangerous fire.

"Wal," he went on, "I don't guess I ken make folks talk if they don't notion it. But I want to say right here I bought haf o' Zip's claim fer good dollars, an' I'm goin' to pay Sandy Joyce a tiptop wage fer workin' my share. An' "—he paused and glanced swiftly and defiantly at the faces which were no longer smiling—"an' I want to say I bought the richest lay-out in this bum camp. Any feller who ain't o' the same opinion ken git right up on to his hind legs an' call me a 'liar'—an' I'm jest yearnin' fer some feller to git around an' call me that. Jest turn it over in your fool heads. You don't need to hurry any. Ther's days an' days to come, an' at any time I'll be glad fer all o' you to come along an' tell me I'm—a liar."

He paused, his fierce eyes gleaming. He felt good. His outburst had relieved his pent feelings. It was a safety-valve which had worked satisfactorily at the right moment. But as he received no answer to his challenge he turned to Sandy.

"Ther' don't seem to be nuthin' doin'," he said, with a grim smile. "So ef you'll come right along we'll fix things out in the store. Guess you ken finish your hash after."

Sandy rose. For a moment Bill did not attempt to move. It was as though he were giving the rest of the boarders one last chance of accepting his challenge. But as no one offered any comment or made any attempt to stay him, he turned away at last with a sigh which was probably of disappointment, and led the way out into the store.

But if the men had made no comment in his presence, it was a different matter after his departure. Loud indignation broke out, and fierce, if impotent, protest passed from lip to lip. It was only for a few moments, however, and presently anger gave place to a realization of the absurdity of the whole thing.

The humour of these men was tickled. The whole thing was too ludicrous for words. To think that Wild Bill, the renowned sharp, the shrewdest, the widest man on Suffering Creek, had fallen for such a proposition! It was certainly

the funniest, the best joke that had ever come their way. How had it happened? they asked each other. Had Zip been clever enough to "salt" his claim? It was hardly likely. Only they knew he was hard up, and it was just possible, with his responsibilities weighing heavily on him, he had resorted to an illicit practice to realize on his property. They thought of and discussed every possible means they could think of by which Bill could have been lured to the hook—and caught—and landed. That was the joke. It was astounding. It was too good. To-morrow the whole camp would be ringing with laughter at the news, but—but the laughter was not likely to reach the gambler's ears.

In the meantime it was quite a different man who was lounging over Minky's counter talking to Sandy and the storekeeper. Bill had relieved the pressure of his mood for the moment, and now, like a momentarily exhausted volcano, he was enjoying the calm of reaction.

"I'll need you to start work right away," he was saying, "an' you ken draw on me fer all the supplies you need. It's a dandy claim," he went on grimly, "but I don't know fer sure what you'll likely find on it. Maybe you'll find suthin' —if you work long enough. Anyways, you'll start by sinkin' a shaft; an' you'll kep on sinkin' it till—till I tell you to quit."

"But that ain't the regular way gold——"

"Say, whose claim is it? Am I payin' you or not?" demanded the gambler sharply.

"Sure you are, but you said it was the richest——"

"That was back ther' at supper," said Bill coldly. "Guess supper's over."

Sandy had no quickness of understanding. He did not appreciate the fineness of the distinction. He shook his head solemnly.

"Maybe I ain't jest bright enuff to foller——"

"You ain't," agreed Bill shortly.

He winked at Minky, who was listening interestedly. Then he turned abruptly and pointed at the array of patent medicines adorning one of the shelves.

"Say," he cried, "'bout them physics."

Minky turned and gazed affectionately at the shelf. It

was the pride of his store. He always kept it well dusted and dressed. The delicate wrappings and fancy labels always had a strong fascination for him. Then there were the curative possibilities of the contents of the inviting packages as set forth by the insistent "drummer" who sold them to him.

"An elegant stock," he murmured. "Sort of concentrated health." Then he glanced round anxiously. "Your hosses ain't ailin'?" he inquired. "I got most everything fer hosses. Ther's embrocation, hoss iles, every sort of lin'ments. Hoss balls? Linseed?"

The gambler shook his head.

"You ain't got physic fer men-folk?" he inquired.

"I sure have. But—but you ain't sick?" Minky eyed his friend narrowly.

Bill's mouth twisted wryly.

"I ain't jest sick," he replied. "But," he added hopefully, "you can't never be sure."

Minky nodded.

"That's so. I'd say you don't look a heap sick, though."

"You sure don't," agreed Sandy. "But, as you sez, you can't never tell. Now, you buyin' haf Zip's claim makes——" His words died down to a thoughtful murmur. Bill's look was somehow discouraging as he pointed at the medicine.

"What you got?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why, most everything," said Minky. "Ther', you see that longish bottle? That's a dandy cough cure. Guess you ain't needin' that? No? Ah!" as Bill shook his head, "I didn't guess you'd a cough. Corns? Now, this yer packet is an elegant fixin' fer corns, soft an' hard. It jest kills 'em stone dead, sure. It's bully stuff, but 'tain't good fer eatin'. You ain't got corns?" he inquired, as Bill again shook his head. "Ah, seems a pity." He turned again to the shelf, determined, if possible, to suit his customer, and lifted down a number of packets and sealed bottles. "Now, here," he cried, holding up a dainty box tied up with a delicate-coloured ribbon. For a moment his audience believed it to be candy, but he quickly undeceived them. "Now this yer is dandy truck, though I don't guess ther's a heap o' use fer it on Suffering Creek. It's fer softening alkali water.

When the drummer told me that, I guessed to him ther' wa'an't a heap o' water drunk in this camp. But he said it wa'an't fer drinkin' water; it was fer baths. I kind o' told him that wouldn't help the sale any, so he said it could be used fer washin'. Seein' he couldn't sell me any that way neither, he got riled an' give me a present of it, an' said he guessed Sufferin' Creek *did* use water fer washing gold. Y'see, its price is a dollar an' a haf, but, seein' it's kind o' dead stock, you ken have it a present."

Bill took it.

"It's mine," he said. And Sandy watched him with some concern.

"You—you ain't takin' a bath?" he inquired nervously.

"Don't talk foolish," cried Bill, and turned again to his scrutiny of the shelf. "What else you got? Any stummick physic?"

"Sure." Minky held up a small bottle of tabloids. "Camel-hell," he said, with the assurance of a man who knows the worth of the article he is offering for sale. "Now this yer is Camel-hell—C-a-l-o-m-e-l. And I'd sure say the name is appropriate. That doggone 'drummer' feller said ther' was enough in one o' them bottles to kep the stummicks of a whole blamed menagerie right fer six months. It's real dandy——"

He broke off suddenly, and his look of enthusiasm was abruptly replaced by one of anxious interest that bordered closely on apprehension. His audience realized the change, and both men glanced swiftly in the direction whence the storekeeper's gaze had become so suddenly concentrated. Instantly they became aware that two strangers had quietly entered the store, and had taken their places at one of the tables under the open window.

Bill thought he recognized one of the men, but was not sure where he had seen him. Sandy saw nothing remarkable in their presence, and at once turned back to the counter.

"More of 'em," said Minky in a low tone, when finally Bill turned back to him.

"Yes. Many while I bin away?"

"Four or five. All—come along fer a game—it seems." Minky's eyes were brooding.

Suddenly a light of intelligence sprang into Bill's thoughtful face.

"Ah, I remember one o' them. I see him in Spawn City —in a bum gamblin' dive."

Sandy suddenly roused to a keen interest.

"Them strangers," he said—"that 'minds me I was talkin' to one last night. He was askin' me when a stage was running from here."

"What d'you tell him?" demanded Bill quickly, and Minky's eyes asked the question too.

Sandy laughed conceitedly.

"I sure said ther' wa'an't no stages runnin', with James' gang around. I wa'an't goin' to give nuthin' away to strangers. Y'see, if I'd pretended we was sendin' out stages, we'd have that gang hangin' around waitin'. 'Tain't no use in gatherin' wasps around a m'lasses-pot."

"No. You didn't tell him nuthin' else?" Bill inquired, eyeing him shrewdly.

"I did that," said Sandy triumphantly. "I filled him up good. I jest told him we was wise to James an' his gang, an' was takin' no chances, seein' Sufferin' Creek was such a rich lay-out. I told him we was bankin' up the gold right here, an' holdin' it till the pile was so big we could claim a Gover'ment escort that could snap their fingers at James an' his lay-out."

A swift exchange of glances passed between the gambler and the storekeeper. And then, in a quiet voice, Bill demanded—

"Anything else?"

"Nothing o' consequence," replied Sandy, feeling he had acquitted himself well. "He jest asted if Minky here banked the stuff, an' I 'lowed he did."

"Ah!" There was an ominous sparkle in Bill's eyes as he breathed his ejaculation. Then, with a quiet sarcasm quite lost on the obtuse widower, "You'd make an elegant sheriff's officer. You'd raise hell with the crooks."

Sandy appeared pleased with what he took for praise.

"I'd show 'em some——"

But Bill had turned to the storekeeper.

"We've got to git doin'. I've heerd a heap in Spawn

City. Anyway, it was bound to git around. What he's said don't matter a heap. What I've heerd tells me we've got to git busy quick. We've got to clean you out of—stuff, or ther's goin' to be a most outrageous unhealthy time on Sufferin' Creek. We'll fix things to-morrer. Bein' Sunday," he added grimly, "it'll be an elegant day fer settin' things right. Meanwhiles, I'll ast you to fix me a parcel o' them physics, jest some of each, an' you ken git Sunny Oak to pass 'em right on to Zip fer his kids. Guess they'll worry out how best to dose 'em right."

Minky nodded, but his eyes were gloomily watching the two strangers sitting under the window. Sandy, however, suddenly brightened into a wide smile.

"Sure," he cried delightedly, slapping his thigh in his exuberance. "That's it. Course. It's all writ in the reg'lations fer raisin' them kids. Gee! you had me beat clear to death. Physic ev'ry Saturday night. Blamed if this ain't Saturday—an' t'-morrer's Sunday. An' I tho't you was sufferin' and needed physic. Say——"

But Bill, too, was watching the strangers with interested eyes. He was paying no sort of attention to this wonderful discovery of his bright friend.

CHAPTER XXI

SCIPIO MAKES PREPARATIONS

Scipio's impulses were, from his own point of view, entirely practical. Whatever he did, he did with his whole heart. And if his results somehow missed coming out as he intended them, it was scarcely his fault. Rather was it the misfortune of being burdened with a superfluous energy, supported by inadequate thought.

And he felt something of this as he sat in his living-room and glanced round him at the unaccountable disorder that maintained. It was Sunday morning, and all his spare time in his home on Saturday had been spent in cleaning and scrubbing and putting straight, and yet—and yet—— He passed a stubby hand across his forehead, as though to brush aside the vision of the confusion he beheld.

He knew everything was wrong, and a subconscious feeling told him that he had no power to put things right. It was curious, too. Every utensil, every stick of furniture, the floor, the stove, everything had been scrubbed and garnished at a great expense of labour. Everything had been carefully bestowed in the place which, to his mind, seemed most suited for its disposal. Yet now, as he gazed about him at the result, he knew that only a cleanly untidiness prevailed, and he felt disheartened.

Look at the children's clean clothes, carefully folded with almost painful exactness; yet they were like a pile of rags just thrown together. And their unironed condition added to the illusion. Every cooking-pot and pan had been cleaned and polished, yet, to his eyes, the litter of them suggested one of the heaps of iron scraps out on the dumps. How was it every piece of china looked forlornly suggestive of a wanderer without a home? No, he did not know. He

had done his very best, and yet everything seemed to need just that magic touch to give his home the requisite well-cared-for air.

He was disappointed, and his feelings were plainly to be perceived in the regretful glance of his pale eyes. For some moments his optimistic energy rose and prompted him to begin all over again, but he denied himself this satisfaction as he glanced through the window at the morning sun. It was too high up in the sky. There was other work yet before him, with none too much time for its performance before the mid-day meal.

Instead, he turned to the "regulations" which Sunny Oak had furnished him with, and, with an index finger following out the words, he read down the details of the work for Sunday—in so far as his twins were concerned.

"Ah," he murmured, "I got the wash done yesterday. It says here Monday. That's kind of a pity." Then he brightened into hopefulness. "Guess I kin do those things again Monday. I sort o' fancy they could do with another wash 'fore the kiddies wear them. I never could wash clothes right, first time. Now, Sunday." His finger passed slowly from one detail to another. "Breakfast—yes. Bath. Ah, guess that comes next. Now, 'bout that bath." He glanced anxiously round him. Then he turned back to the regulations. "It don't say whether hot or cold," he muttered disappointedly.

For a moment he stood perplexed. Then he began to reason the matter out with himself. It was summer. For grown-ups it would naturally be a cold bath, but he was not so sure about children. They were very young, and it would be so easy for them to take cold, he thought. No, it had best be hot. He would cook some water. This thought prompting him, he set the saucepan on the stove and stirred the fire.

He was turning back to his regulations, when it occurred to him that he must now find something to bath the children in. Glancing about amongst the few pots he possessed, he realized that the largest saucepan, or "billy," in the house would not hold more than a gallon of water. No, these were no use, for though he exercised all his ingenuity he could

see no way of bathing the children in any of them. Once during his cogitations he was very nearly inspired. It flashed through his mind that he might stand each child outside of a couple of pots and wash them all over that way. But he quickly negatived the thought. That wasn't his idea of a bath. They must sit *in* the water.

He was about to give the matter up in despair, when, in a moment of inspiration, he remembered the washing-tub. Of course, that was the very thing. They could both sit in that together. It was down at the river, but he could easily fetch it up.

So he turned again in relief to the regulations. What next? He found his place, and read the directions out slowly.

"'After their bath kids needs an hour's Bible talk.'"

He read it again. And then a third time, so as to make quite sure. Then he turned thoughtfully to the door, staring out at the bright sunlight beyond. He could hear the children's voices as they played outside, but he was not heeding them. He was delving around in a hazy recollection of Bible subjects, which he vaguely remembered having studied when a child.

It was difficult—very difficult. But he was not beaten. There were several subjects that occurred to him in scraps. There was Noah. Then there was Moses. He recalled something of Solomon, and he knew that David slew a giant.

But none of these subjects amounted to more than a dim recollection. Of details he knew none. Worked into a thorough muddle with his worry, he was almost despairing again when suddenly he remembered that Jessie possessed a Bible. Perhaps it was still in the bedroom. He would go and see. It would surely help him. So he promptly went in search of it, and, in a few moments, was sitting down beside the table poring over it and studiously preparing himself for his forthcoming tutelary duties.

CHAPTER XXII

SUNDAY MORNING IN SUFFERING CREEK

On the veranda of the store was the usual Sunday morning gathering of the citizens of Suffering Creek, an impromptu function which occurred as regularly as the sun rose and set. Some of the men were clad in their best black broadcloth, resplendent, if shiny at the seams, and bespotted with drink and tobacco stains. But the majority had made no such effort to differentiate between the seventh day of the week and the other six. The only concession that every one yielded, and then with bad enough grace in many instances, was to add to the boredom of their day of rest by performing a scanty ablution in the washing trough at the back of the store.

Minky was one of the few who clung to the customs of his up-bringing. He was there, ample, and gaily beaming, in "boiled" shirt, and a highly coloured vest, which clashed effusively with his brilliantly variegated bow-tie, but of which he was inordinately proud.

It was the custom at these meetings to discuss any matters which affected the well-being of the community, to listen to any item of interest pointing the prosperity of the local gold industry, to thresh out complaints. In fact, it became a sort of Local Government Board, of which the storekeeper was president, and such men as Wild Bill, Sandy Joyce and one or two of the more successful miners formed the governing committee.

But it was yet comparatively early, and many sore heads were still clinging to their rough pillows. Saturday night was always a heavy occasion, and the Sunday morning sleep was a generally acknowledged necessity. However,

this did not prevent discussion amongst those already assembled.

Wild Bill was not there. Sandy Joyce was still absent, although both had been long since stirring. Some one sarcastically suggested that they had gone off to inspect the gambler's rich strike before Sandy got to work on it on the morrow. This drew a great laugh at Wild Bill's expense. And it was only the loyal Minky's voice that checked it.

"You'se fellers are laffin'," he said, in good-humoured reproval. "Wal, laff. I can't say I know why Bill's bo't that claim, but I'll say this: I'd a heap sooner foller his money than any other man's. I've sure got a notion we best do our laffin' right now."

"That's so," agreed Joe Brand reluctantly. "Bill's a cur'us feller. He's so mighty cur'us I ain't got much use for him—personal. But I'll say right here, he's wide enough to beat most any feller at any bluff he's got savvee to put up. Howsum, every 'smart' falls fer things at times. Y'see, they get lookin' fer rich strikes that hard, an' are so busy keppin' other folks out o' them, it's dead easy gettin' 'em trippin'. Guess that tow-headed sucker, Zip's, got him trippin' about now, sure."

Minky shook his head. He did not believe it. If Bill had been caught napping, he must have wilfully gone to sleep. He knew the man too well. However, he had no intention of arguing the matter with these people. So he turned away and stood staring out at the far distance beyond the creek.

In a few moments the whole matter was dismissed from his mind, and his thoughts filled with a something that lately had become a sort of obsession to him. It was the safety of his gold-dust that troubled, and as each day passed his apprehensions grew. He felt that trouble was threatening in the air of Suffering Creek, and the thought of how easily he might be taken at a disadvantage worried him terribly. He knew that it was imperative for him to unload his gold. But how? How could it be done in safety, in the light of past events? It was suicidal to send it off to Spawn City on a stage, with the James gang watching the district. And the Government——?

Suddenly his eyes lit excitedly. He pointed out across the creek with startling abruptness, in a direction where the land sloped gradually upwards towards the more distant foothills, in a broken carpet of pine woods. He was indicating a rift in the forest, where, for a long stretch, a wide clearing had been made by the axes of the pioneers of the camp.

"Ho, fellers!" he cried. "Get a peek yonder. Who's that?"

In an instant every eye followed the direction of his outstretched arm. And the men stood silently watching the progress of a horseman racing headlong through the clearing and making for the creek in front of them as fast as his horse could lay legs to the ground. So silent and intent did the group on the veranda become, that faint, yet sharply distinct, even at that distance, the thrashing of the horse's hoofs floated to their straining ears on the still morning air, and set them wondering.

On came the man at a furious pace. He was leaning far over his horse's neck, so that the whole weight of his body was well clear of the saddle. And as he came the waiting men could plainly see the rise and fall of his arm, as he mercilessly flogged his straining beast. It was Joe Brand who first broke the silence.

"Looks like Sid Morton," he hazarded. "I kind o' seem to mind his sorrel with four white legs. He's comin' from the right direction, too. Guess his ranch is ten miles up yonder. Say, he's makin' a hell of a bat."

"He sure is." Jim Wright, the oldest miner in the camp, blinked his red-rimmed eyes as they watered with the strain of watching. "It's trouble that's chasin' him," he added, with conviction. "Trouble o' some kind."

"What sort o' trouble?" Minky spoke half to himself. Just now there was only one idea of trouble in his mind.

Somebody laughed foolishly.

"There ain't many sorts o' trouble sets a man chasin' like that," said a voice in the background.

Minky glanced round.

"What are they, Van?" he inquired, and turned back again to his scrutiny of the on-coming horseman.

"Sickness, an'—guns," replied the man addressed as Van, with another foolish laugh. "If it's Sid he ain't got anybody out on his ranch to be sick, 'cep' his two 'punchers. An' I don't guess he'd chase for them. Must be 'guns.'"

No one answered him. Everybody was too intent on the extraordinary phenomenon. The man was nearing the creek. In a few seconds he would be hidden from view, for the opposite bank lay far below them, cut off from sight by the height of the rising ground intervening on the hither side.

A moment later a distinct movement amongst the watchers, which had something almost of relief in it, told that this had happened. Minky turned to Jim Wright, who chanced to be nearest him.

"It's Sid," he declared definitely.

The old man nodded.

"An' I guess Van's right," he agreed.

"He'll be along up in a minute," said Joe Brand.

Minky remained where he was watching the point at which he expected to see the horseman reappear. This sudden apparition had fastened itself upon his general apprehension and become part of it. What was the news the man was bringing?

Some of the men moved off the veranda to meet the horseman when he came up, but the majority remained where they were. In spite of their interest, these people were rarely carried away by their feelings in a matter of this sort. Time would tell them all they wanted to know. Perhaps a good deal more than they cared to hear. So they preferred to wait.

Their patience was quickly rewarded. In less than five minutes a bobbing head rose above the brow of the incline. Then came the man. He was still leaning forward to ease his panting horse, whose dilated nostrils and flattened ears told the onlookers of its desperate journey. The leg-weary beast floundered up the steep under quirt and spur—and, in a moment, stood tottering, gasping and steaming before the eager crowd.

Sid Morton almost fell out of the saddle. And as his feet

came to the ground he reeled. But Minky caught him, and he steadied himself.

"I'm beat," the horseman cried desperately. "For mercy's sake hand me a horn o' whisky."

He flung himself down on the edge of the veranda, leaving his jaded beast to any one's care. He was too far spent to think of anything or anybody but himself. Falling back against the post he closed his eyes while the silent crowd looked on stupidly.

Minky seemed to be the only one who fully grasped the situation. He passed the foundered horse on to his "chore-man," and then himself procured a stiff drink of rye whisky for the exhausted man. This he administered without a moment's delay, and the ranchman opened his eyes.

The next instant he sat up, and, in doing so, disclosed a large dark-red patch on the post he had leant against. Minky saw the ominous stain.

"Wounded?" he inquired sharply.

"Some." Then he added, after a moment's hesitation, "Yes, guess I'm done."

The ranchman spoke rapidly. For the moment at least his weakness seemed to have passed, and the weariness to have gone out of his eyes and voice. He strained eagerly, his eyes alight and bloodshot. The whisky had given him momentary courage, momentary strength. Even the drawn lines of rapidly draining life had smoothed out of his young cheeks.

"Here, listen," he cried, almost fiercely. "I'm beat. I know. But—but I want to tell you things. You needn't to notice that hole in my back." He writhed painfully. "Guess they—they got my lung, or—or somethin'. Y'see, it's the James gang. Some of 'em are "—a spasm of pain shot athwart his face as he hesitated—"'bout three miles back ther'——"

At this point a terrible fit of coughing interrupted him, and blood trickled into the corners of his mouth. Minky understood. He dispatched one of the bystanders for some brandy, while he knelt down to the man's support. At once the drooping body sagged heavily upon his arm; but when the paroxysm had passed the weight lightened, and the dying

man hurried on with his story, although his voice had lost more than half of its former ring.

"Ther' ain't much time," he said, with something like a gasp. "He's run off my stock, an' set my hay an' the corrals afire. He—he got us when we was roundin'—roundin' up a bunch o' steers. Y'see—y'see, we was in—in the saddle."

Again he paused. This time his breath came in gasps and deep-throated gurglings. He struggled on, however, stumbling and gasping with almost every second word.

"We put up a—scrap—good. An'—an' both—my boys was—was dropped cold. After I—I emptied—my gun—I—I hit—the trail for here. Then I—got it good. Say——"

Once more he was interrupted by a fit of terrible coughing. And the moment it eased the storekeeper held the brandy, which one of the boys had brought, to his blood-flecked lips. The poor fellow's end was not far off. The onlookers knew it. Minky knew there was practically nothing to be done for him. All these men had witnessed the approach of death in this form too often before. A lung pierced by a bullet! They could do nothing but look on curiously, helplessly and listen carefully to the story he was trying to tell.

The man struggled with himself for some moments. The strong young body was yielding reluctantly enough to the death-grip. And at last his words gasped haltingly upon the still air.

"Their plugs—wasn't—fresh. Mine—was. That—give—me—the—legs—of 'em. But—they—rode—hard, an'——"

His voice died down to a whistling gasp and his eyes closed. He was sinking fast. Minky forced more brandy between his lips. And presently the drooping eyelids widened, and a momentary strength lifted the weakening body.

"They follered," he mumbled, "but—I—don't—know—how—many. 'Bout—three. Three—miles—back—I—I—lost—'em——"

His eyes were glazing and staring painfully. And as his last words hovered on his lips they were drowned by the gurgling and rattling in his throat. Suddenly a shudder

passed through his frame. He started, his eyes staring wildly.

"I'm—done!" he gasped. His arms shot up convulsively, his legs flung out. And then all his weight dropped back on to the storekeeper's supporting arm. The next moment his body seemed to heave as with a deep, restful sigh, and his head lolled helplessly forward. He was dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BATH AND——

SCIPIO started and looked up as a joyous greeting from the children outside warned him of the approach of a visitor. He was rather glad of the interruption, too. He found the Bible offered him such an enormous field of research. It was worse than enormous; it was overwhelming. The Bible was really more than he could study in the few minutes he had allowed himself. As yet he had not found even one single mention of the few subjects he still retained a vague recollection of.

As he glanced at the doorway it was darkened by a familiar figure. Sunny Oak, as ragged, disreputable and unclean as usual, smiled himself into the room.

"Howdy, Zip?" he greeted genially. "Guessed I'd git around, seein' it was Sunday. Y'see, folks don't work any Sunday. I'd sure say it's a real blessin' folks is 'lowed to rest one day in seven. Talkin' o' work, I heerd tell you've took a pardner to your claim. Wild Bill's smart. He ain't bluffed you any?"

The loafer seated himself in the other chair with an air of utter weariness. He might just have finished a spell of the most arduous labour, instead of having merely strolled across the dumps. Scipio smiled faintly.

"He hasn't bluffed me any," he said gently. "Seems to me he wouldn't bluff me. Yes, he's in on haf my claim. Y'see, he thinks ther's gold in sight, an'—an' I know ther' ain't. That's what's troubling me. I kind of feel mean some."

Sunny yawned luxuriously.

"Don't you worry any," he said easily. "Bill's mighty

wide. If he's come in on your claim he's—needin' to bad. Say——"

He broke off and turned alertly to the door. A sound of voices reached them, and a moment later Sandy Joyce and Toby stood grinning in the doorway.

"Gee!" cried Sunny. "Gettin' quite a party."

"I'm real pleased you folks come along," Scipio declared warmly. He stood up and looked round uncertainly. "Say," he went on, his pale face flushing a little ruefully, "come right in, boys. I don't see jest where you're goin' to sit. Maybe the table's good an' strong. This chair 'll do for one."

But Toby would have none of it.

"Set you down, Zip," he cried. "I got this doorway. Guess the table 'll fit Sandy. He's kind o' high in his notions. I jest see Bill comin' along up from the river. Looked like he was comin' this way. How's the kids?"

"Why, bully," said Scipio amiably. "Y'see, I got 'em fixed right all right since Sunny wrote out those regulations for me. Those regulations are jest dandy, and I'm desperate obliged to him. A feller would need to be a bum sort of fool, anyhow, who couldn't fix kids right with it all set out so careful. There sure are things set down there I'd never have thought of—an' I'm their father, too." He paused and glanced nervously round at the friendly faces. Then, with evident anxiety, he hurried on. "I was just thinkin'," he exclaimed, "maybe some hot coffee wouldn't come amiss. Y'see, I ain't no rye. Guess I'll make that coffee right away. I got water cooking on the stove. I was goin' to use it for bathin' the kids, but——"

His visitors exchanged swift glances, and Sunny broke in.

"Don't do it, Zip," he said, with an amiable grin. "These boys don't figger to unpickle their vitals with no sech truck as coffee. Say"—his eyes wandered to where his carefully written regulations were posted, "talkin' o' baths, have you physicked the kids right?"

Scipio, feeling somewhat relieved, returned to his chair and lodged himself upon its edge. He could not settle himself at his ease. Somehow he felt that these men were entirely his superior in all those things which count for manhood; and the kindness of such a visit rather overwhelmed him.

Then, too, he was sincerely regretting his inadequate hospitality. Now he became nervously enthusiastic.

"I sure did," he cried eagerly. "Those physics were real elegant. If you'll tell me what they cost you, Sunny, I'll square up now. How——"

He pulled out some money, but the loafer waved it aside with ridiculous dignity.

"Thievin' doctors needs pay. I ain't no bum doc. What you give 'em—the kids?"

Scipio bundled his money back into his pocket, flushing at the thought that he had unintentionally insulted his benefactor.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "I didn't give 'em no corn cure. Y'see," he added apologetically, "I couldn't find no corns on 'em to speak of. But," he went on more hopefully, "I give 'em the cough cure. They ain't got no coughs, neither of 'em, but, seein' they was to take a bath, I guessed it 'ud be a kind of precaution. Then there were them powders. How were they called? Why—Lick—Lick—well, they were called Lick—something. Anyways, I give 'em one each. They didn't take 'em easy, an' was nigh sick, but they got 'em down after awhile. Then, seein' they got bruises on their legs, playin', I rubbed 'em good with hoss lin'ment. After that I give 'em some o' that tonic—quinine an' something. An' then, seein' they couldn't eat food this mornin', an' had got sick headaches, I give 'em one o' them fizzy Seidlitz fellers between 'em. Jamie bein' the smallest I give him the thin white packet, an' the other, the blue one, I give to Vada. That seemed to fix them good, an' I guess they're most ready fer their baths by now."

"I guessed you'd treat 'em right," approved Sunny seriously. "Ther' ain't nothin' like physic. You're sure a wise guy, Zip."

Sandy Joyce agreed, too.

"You was dead right," he said impressively. "It don't never do takin' chances with kids o' that age. Chances is bum things, anyway. Y'see, kids ken ketch such a heap o' things. Ther's bile, an' measles, an' dropsy, an' cancer, an' hydryfoby, an' all kinds o' things. They's li'ble to ketch 'em as easy as gettin' flies wi' molasses. An' some o' them is

ter'ble bad. Ever had hydryfoby? No? Wal, I ain't neither, but I see a feller with it oncet, an' he jest went around barkin' like a camp dog chasin' after swill bar'ls, an' was scared to death o' water——"

"Some folks don't need hydryfoby fer that," put in Toby, with a grin.

"Ther' ain't no call fer you buttin' in," flashed Sandy angrily. "Guess I'm talkin' o' things you ain't heerd tell of. You ain't out o' your cradle yet."

He turned back to his host and prepared to continue his list of horrors, but Sunny forestalled him.

"Talkin' o' water," he said, "you ain't bathed the kids yet?"

Scipio shook his head.

"The water's cookin'."

"Cookin'?" Toby whistled.

Sunny sat up, all interest.

"Hot bath?" he inquired, with wide eyes. "You ain't givin' 'em a *hot* bath?" he exclaimed incredulously.

A troubled look came into Scipio's pale eyes. He doubted his purpose in face of his friends' astonishment.

"Why, yes. That's how I *was* thinking," he said weakly. "Y'see, I guessed it would soften the dirt quicker, and make it easy wipin' it off."

"But ain't you scared o' them—peelin'?" inquired Sandy, refusing to be left out of the discussion.

Scipio looked perplexed.

"Peelin'?" he said. "I—I don't think I get you."

"Why," explained Sandy readily, "peelin' their skins off 'em. You allus sets potatoes in b'ilin' water to git their skins peeled quick. Same with hogs. Same with most anything. I call that a fool chance to take."

Scipio's perplexity merged into a mild smile.

"I wouldn't jest set 'em into boilin' water," he explained; "kind of warm, with a bit o' soda."

Sunny approved.

"That sure don't sound too bad," he declared. "But wot about 'em gettin' cold? Takin' all that dirt off sudden, y'see——"

"He's dosed 'em wi' cough cure," broke in Toby.

"Sure," agreed Sunny. "I'd fergot—— Say"—he turned to the doorway and craned towards it—"here's—here's Wild Bill coming along."

Toby promptly scrambled up from the door-sill and made way for the Trust president. He strode into the room with a quick glance round and a short, harsh "Howdy?" for the lesser members of his corporation. His manner towards Scipio was no less unbending.

And, curiously enough, his coming silenced all further discussion. Scipio had nothing to say whatever, and the others felt that here was their leader from whom they must take their cue.

Nor was it long in coming. Scipio rose and offered his chair to the newcomer, but the gambler promptly kicked the proffered seat aside, and took up his position on the fuel-box. He glared into the little man's face for a few seconds, and then opened his lips.

"Wal?" he drawled.

Scipio stirred uneasily.

"I'm real glad to see you, Bill," he managed to mumble out. "I ain't got no rye——"

"Rye—hell!" The gambler was not a patient man, and the laws of hospitality interested him not in the least. "Say"—he pointed at the open Bible on the table beside Sandy—"takin' on psalm-smitin'?"

Scipio hurled himself into the breach.

"It's them regulations Sunny give me for raisin' the kids. They need a Bible talk after their bath. I bin readin' up some."

A momentary twinkle flashed into the gambler's eyes.

"Have you give 'em their bath?" he demanded.

Scipio pointed at the stove, on which the water was already boiling.

"The water's cookin'," he said. "Guess it's most ready."

The gambler glanced round the room severely.

"Then why the devil is you'se fellers settin' around? Wher's the tub?"

"Down at the creek. It's the wash-tub," Scipio explained, bestirring himself. The other men stood up ready.

There was no doubt that Bill had taken possession of the

situation. He always seemed to dominate his fellows. Now he caught Scipio's eye and held him.

"Jest gather the things up quick," he said authoritatively, "an' we'll get busy."

And as Scipio heaped up the necessary articles for the bath on the table, he looked on with the keenest interest. Finally the little man paused beside the heap, holding in his hand the box of water-softener, which he was eyeing somewhat doubtfully. Bill's eyes still twinkled.

"Wot's that?" he demanded in his savage way, as though he had never seen the box before.

"That? Why, that's for bathin'," said Scipio doubtfully. "Y'see, it's a fixin' swell ladies in Noo York an' such places use for makin' their baths soft an' dandy. Sunny brought it along last night. He guessed it would be elegant for the kids. Y'see, his mother sent it a present to him. He didn't reckon he had use for it, seein' he took his bath in the creek every mornin'. He guessed natural water was best for him."

Bill snorted.

"Sunny's a bright lad," he said, while Toby softly exploded with laughter in the doorway.

But the gambler was bent on the purpose in hand, and promptly dismissed the loafer's fairy-story from his mind.

"Here, get around and bear a hand," he cried, indicating the pile on the table. "You, Toby, quit laffin' an' git a holt on them clean laundry. An', say, don't you muss 'em any. Sunny, you best pile up them washin' fixin's—that hand-scrubber, the soap, that wash-flannel an' the towels. Guess that's the nighest you'll ever come to bathin' yourself. Sandy Joyce ken carry the hot water, an', if Zip's yaller pup gets around, see you don't scald him any. Guess I'll handle these yer dippers. That way Zip 'll be free to take the kids along. After they're bathed they ken set around in the sun, while Zip gives 'em a real elegant Bible talk."

The whole thing was simplicity itself in the capable hands of a man of Bill's energy. But for his advent the bath might have been delayed until the water on the cookstove had boiled away. What with Sandy's love of debate and Sunny's indolence, the visit of these men might have been prolonged for hours. As it was, in five minutes after Bill's

appearance upon the scene the cortège was ready to set out for the water's edge; and not only ready, but more than willing to submit the all-unconscious twins to the combination of their inexperienced efforts in matters ablutionary. The one saving clause for the poor little creatures was the presence of their father and a man of practical intelligence such as the gambler. How they might have fared at the hands of the others is a matter best not contemplated too closely.

At a word from Wild Bill the procession set out. Scipio headed it, with a child clinging to each hand, doddling along at his side all blissfully unconscious, but delighted at going whither their elders led them. Vada babbled with delight, and kept up a fire of chattering questions in a truly feminine manner, while little Jamie, stolid but no less joyous, devoured everything with hungry, thoughtful eyes, and punctuated his sister's remarks with characteristic grunts, and an occasional emphatic ejaculation and protest at the yellow pup, who would lick his dirty legs.

Behind these came Sandy Joyce, the picture of absurd dignity, as he vainly strove to carry the boiler of water without scalding himself. Toby came immediately behind him, with the bundle of laundry, a tumbled mass in his arms, crushed firmly to his stout chest, lest, by any ill-fate, he should drop any of the strange garments, which looked so absurdly small in his ignorant eyes.

Next came Sunny with the cleansing properties, which he carried gingerly, as though the very nature of them were repugnant to him, and the labour of carrying them an offence to his creed of life. The soap particularly troubled him. Its slippery nature made him drop it several times, till it seemed almost as though it resented him personally, and was trying to escape from the insult of such association. Wild Bill brought up the rear of the column, bearing the bright tin dippers, which clattered violently as they swung together on their string loops. He suggested nothing so much as a herder driving before him his unusual flock by the aid of a violent rattling on tin cans.

Solemnly the procession wound its way down the hill. Only the voices of the children, the yapping of the pup and the clatter of tinware enlivened the journey. The men's

minds were engrossed with their various charges. It was serious—desperately serious. But then, a bath in any form, much less a bath of two small children, was an affair of the gravest importance to these men. Then, too, there was nervousness with it. Everybody felt responsible, from the father to the desperate instigator of what was, in their minds, something almost amounting to an outrage.

However, the windings and roughnesses of the path, as it twisted its way through the scrubby bushes lining the creek bank, were finally negotiated more or less satisfactorily. The mishaps were not as great as might have been anticipated. Sandy only scalded himself twice, and his curses had to be stifled by a sharp reprimand from the gambler. Toby skidded down the slope once, and only saved the laundry at the personal expense of a torn shirt and a grazed elbow. Sunny, except for his difference of opinion with the soap, enjoyed no other mishap, and Bill's only transgression was to send one of the dippers, amidst a volley of curses, hurtling at the yellow pup, who at one time threatened to upset all Sandy's dignity, and incidentally the boiling water, by getting mixed up with that worthy widower's legs.

The halt was made beside the wash-tub, and childish curiosity promptly asserted itself.

"You ain't washin' more clothes, poppa?" demanded Vada, with wide questioning eyes. "Ain't this Sunday?"

"Pop-pa wash tothes," mumbled Jamie.

Sunny took it upon himself to put the matter right in the small minds. He beamed upon the children.

"Poppa's going to wash *you*," he said, with unction.

"Wot for?" demanded Vada. "We ain't done nothin'."

"'Cos you needs it," replied the loafer, uncomfortably avoiding the blandly questioning eyes.

"Ugh!" interjected Jamie.

"We ain't as dirty as you," said Vada, after a thoughtful pause.

Sunny busied himself laying out the utensils on the grassiest spot he could find. Toby glanced round after depositing the laundry department. He guffawed loudly, and went on with his work. Sunny's face went a dirty scarlet, but he refrained from retort. And promptly little Vada went on.

"I don't want bath," she protested plaintively. And Jamie chorused in with a grunt of agreement, while he busied himself trying to climb up the sides of the tub.

Scipio snatched him away, and looked round weakly for support. It came in a sharp command from Bill, who had seated himself on a fallen tree-trunk.

"Git busy," he ordered. "Set that doggone water in the tub, an' Sunny ken dip the boiler full of cold. You boys ken do that while Zip gets the kids ready. Guess he'll likely know best wher' the strings an' buttons is."

His orders were silently executed by the men. But the children had no awe of the gambler, and their protests were many and querulous. However, the tub was filled satisfactorily, and Scipio finally succeeded in fumbling the clothes off the children.

It was a curious scene. Scipio moved about with an air of the mildest perplexity. Sunny slouched through his work as though it were the hardest of labour, although he was really enjoying himself. Toby was grinning all over his face with huge enjoyment, while Sandy performed his share with such an aspect of care that his labours might have been of an absolutely epoch-making nature. Bill suggested simple authority. The "kids" must be bathed, and he was going to see it done.

When all preparations had been made, Scipio became the chief operator, and each man took up his position where best he could witness the process. There was something so mildly stimulating to these ruffians in observing the clumsy lavering of two small children. They all appreciated cleanliness in theory; it was only the practice that they were unaccustomed to, and here it was being demonstrated before their interested eyes. They watched Scipio's efforts for some moments in silence, while he, with gentle persuasion, overcame each childish protest. He did it in such a kindly, patient way that very soon these small atoms of humanity, sitting facing each other cross-legged in the tub, gained ample confidence, and gave expression to infantile delight by splashing each other with water, and incidentally treating their father to an even less welcome bath.

They laughed and crowed and chattered while their father

plied the house-flannel, and only were their piping voices quiet at such moments as their small round faces were smothered with soap-suds, or lost in the embracing folds of the none too savoury cloth.

But on the part of the spectators, their interest would not permit of long silence. And it was Sandy Joyce, quite irrepressible where advice was concerned, who found it necessary to interfere.

"Ain't you rubbin' 'em too hard?" he questioned, after prolonged cogitation.

Scipio turned to reply in the midst of swabbing Jamie's lower limbs. He was holding one foot dangerously high in the air, and the movement caused him to upset the child's balance, so that his upper part promptly disappeared beneath the frothing suds. A wild splashing and yell from Vada warned her father of the threatened tragedy, and Jamie was hauled up, coughing and spluttering. The little man, with scared face, sought at once to pacify the frightened child, while Sunny withered the interfering widower with a few well-chosen words.

"Say, you'd butt in an' tell folk they wasn't nailin' up your coffin right," he cried angrily. "Will you kep that instrument o' foolishness o' yours quiet fer ten minutes?"

Sandy flushed.

"They ain't got hides like hogs," he grumbled. "They needs handlin' easy. Say, jest look at that. What's——"

He broke off, and all eyes watched Scipio's movements as he turned Jamie over, and, supporting his dripping body in the crook of his arm, plied the flannel upon the boy's back. The moment was a tense one. Then a sigh of relief went up as the child dropped back in the water with a splash.

"I ain't never see kids handled that way," cried the disgusted Sandy, unable to keep silence any longer. Then, as no one seemed inclined to question his statement, he went on, "Wot I sez is, kids needs women-folk to do they things right. Zip's handlin' 'em like raw beef." Then he turned on Sunny, whose rebuke was still rankling. "Guess you'll say he ain't—bein' contrary. Now, ef I was washin' 'em, I'd——"

"Shut up," cried Wild Bill harshly. Then he added, with biting sarcasm, "I ain't surprised you're a widder-man."

Toby made no attempt to disguise his laughter, and it maddened the unfortunate Sandy; and if a look could have killed, Sunny would have died grinning. However, the widower sheltered himself in the silence demanded of him until the children were lifted out of the tub and dried by their patient father. Nor did he even attempt to further interfere while their parent struggled them into their little woollen undershirts.

CHAPTER XXIV

——A BIBLE TALK

It was with a sigh of relief that Scipio now turned to Wild Bill. Somehow, he naturally looked to him for guidance. Nor did he quite know why.

"'Bout that Bible talk?" he inquired. "Guess you said they best set around in the sun."

Bill nodded.

"I sure did. Guess they kind o' need airin' some. 'Tain't no use in settin' in their clothes damp; they'll be gettin' sick, sure. Ther's a dandy bit o' grass right here. Best set 'em down, an' get around an' hand 'em your talk."

But the worried father pushed his weedy hair off his forehead with a troubled air.

"I haven't read up a deal," he apologized.

The gambler promptly swept his objection aside.

"That don't figger any. Once you get goin' you won't find no trouble. It's dead easy after you're started. That's the way it is with passons. They jest get a holt of a notion, an' then—why, they jest yarn."

"I see," replied Scipio doubtfully, while the other men gathered round. "But," he went on more weakly still, "'bout that notion?"

Bill stirred impatiently.

"That's it. You start right in with the notion."

"Course," cried Sandy. "The notion's easy. Why, ther's heaps o' things you ken take as a notion. Say, wa'an't ther' a yarn 'bout some blamed citizen what took to a cave, an' the checkens an' things got busy feedin' him?"

"Ravens," said Sunny.

"Ravens nuthin'," cried the indignant Sandy. "Checkens of the air, they was."

Sunny shrugged.

"That ain't no sort o' Bible talk, anyway," he protested. "You need suthin' what gives 'em a lesson. Now, ther's Nore an' his floatin' ranch——"

"That wa'an't a ranch neither," contradicted Sandy promptly. "It was jest a barn."

"Ark," said Toby.

"Wal, ark then," admitted Sandy. He didn't mind Toby's interference.

But the discussion was allowed to go no further. Bill's impatience manifested itself promptly.

"Say, it don't matter a cuss whether it was an' ark or a barn or a ranch. Sunny's yarn goes. Now, jest set around an' git the kids in the middle, an' you, Zip, git busy with this Nore racket."

The last authority had given its decision. There was no more to be said, and the matter was promptly proceeded with. The expectant children, who had stood by listening to the discussion of their elders, were now seated on the grass, and before them sat the board of Scriptural instruction. Bill remained in his position on the tree-trunk. On the ground, cross-legged, sat Scipio, on his right. Sunny lounged full length upon the ground next to him. Sandy and Toby formed the other horn of the half-circle on the gambler's left.

It was a quaint picture upon which the warm noon sun shone down. The open grass clearing, surrounded with tall dense bushes. On one side the wash-tub and the various appurtenances of the bath, with the creek a little way beyond. And in the open, sitting alone, side by side, their little pink bodies bare of all but their coarse woollen undershirts, their little faces shining with wholesome soap, their eyes bright with expectancy for the story that was to come, the two pretty children of a lonely father. Then, in a semicircle about them, the members of the Trust, with their hard, unclean faces, their rough clothes and rougher manners, and their uncultured minds driven by hearts that were—well, just human.

"Git busy," ordered Bill, when the Trust had finally settled itself.

And promptly Scipio, with more determination than discretion, cleared his throat and plunged into his peroration.

His mild face beamed. Gentleness and affection shone in every line of it. And somehow his diffidence, the realization of his ignorance of the work demanded of him, were absorbed and lost to his consciousness in the wonderful parental delight of teaching his offspring.

"Say, kiddies," he began, with that soft inflection that seems so much a part of some men of rough manners, "I want you to listen careful to a yarn I'm goin' to tell you about. Y'see——"

He hesitated, and unconsciously one hand was lifted and passed across his brow with a movement that suggested puzzlement. It was as though he were not quite sure whither his story were going to lead him.

The gambler nodded encouragingly.

"Rully," he murmured, turning his eyes just for one moment in the little man's direction. But it was only for a moment. The next he was staring absorbedly out at the bush opposite, like a man lost in some train of thought far removed from the matter in hand. His beady eyes stared unsmilingly, but with curious intentness.

However, Scipio was far too much concerned with what lay before him to think of anything else. But the sharply spoken encouragement spurred him, and he went ahead.

"Now, maybe you both heard tell how God made this funny old world for us to live in," he went on, endeavouring to give lightness to his manner. "He made Sufferin' Creek, too——"

Toby coughed, and Sandy whispered audibly to him.

"I don't guess Zip ought to run Sufferin' Creek in this yarn," he said seriously. "Sufferin' Creek don't seem right in a Bible talk."

Scipio waited, and then, ignoring the comment, laboured clumsily on.

"Now, I'm goin' to tell you a yarn about it. Y'see, kiddies—y'see, ther' weren't a heap o' folk around when God first fixed things right——"

"Jest one man an' a snake," interrupted Sandy in his informative way.

"Shut up," whispered Toby, prodding him with his elbow.

Sandy scowled, but remained silent.

"Wal," continued Scipio, "as I was sayin', He jest made one sort o' sample man an' a snake. An'," he added, suddenly brightening under inspiration, "He sot 'em in a garden, an' called it the Garden of Eden."

Little Vada suddenly clapped her hands.

"Yes, an' it was all flowers an'—an' fruit," she cried ecstatically.

Jamie's eyes were dancing with delight, too, but he remained silent, waiting for developments.

The members of the Trust looked on with the deepest interest. Each man's face wore a half-smile—that is, all except the gambler's, who still appeared to be absorbed in his own thought—and the bush opposite. But the interest of these men was less in the little man's story than in a speculation as to when he was going to break down, and yield his tutelary attitude before a battery of infantile questions.

However, Scipio was still in a fairly strong position.

"Well," he agreed, "I do guess ther' was fruit ther', but I don't guess it was a fruit ranch exactly. Maybe it was sort of mixed farmin'. Howsum, that don't matter a heap. Y'see, ther' was heaps an' heaps of animals, an' bugs, an' spiders, an' things—an' jest one man."

"Ther' was a woman," corrected the irrepressible Sandy. "That's dead sure. They got busy on one of the man's ribs an' made her. Ain't that so, Toby?"

He turned to the squat figure beside him for corroboration, but Sunny took up the matter from across the semicircle.

"You're a wise guy," he exclaimed scornfully. "Can't you kep from buttin' in? Say, I'd hate to know sech a heap as you."

Just for an instant Wild Bill turned his sharp eyes on his companions.

"Shut up you'se all," he cried. And promptly Scipio was allowed to continue his story.

"Now, 'bout that garden," he said thoughtfully. "Y'see, God told that feller he wasn't to pick no fruit. Y'see, I guess it was needed fer cannin' or preservin'. Maybe it was needed for makin' elegant candy. I don't know rightly——"

"You're talkin' foolish," exclaimed Sandy, jumping up excitedly. "Cannin'? " he cried scornfully. "They didn't can fruit them days."

"Maybe you're right," said Scipio apologetically.

"I know I am," snorted Sandy.

"Then shut up," cried Bill, without turning his head.

"Anyhow," went on Scipio, when all argument had ceased, "it was jest up to that feller not to pick that fruit. An' he didn't mean to neither, only he got kind o' friendly with that snake——"

Little Vada jumped up.

"I know—I know," she cried, in the wildest excitement. "The snake made him eat an apple, an' then the rain came down, an' poured an' poured——"

"Poured an' poured," echoed Jamie, jumping to his feet and dancing round his sister.

"That's so," admitted Scipio, in relief.

"Poured nothin'," murmured Sandy under his breath. "He's messin' up the whole yarn."

But as his comment didn't reach the father's ears he went on placidly.

"Wal, the rain poured down," he said, "so they was nigh drownded——"

"Why'd the rain tum? " suddenly inquired Jamie.

"Ah! " murmured Scipio. Then he added brightly, "Because he picked the fruit."

"Y'see," explained Vada, with sisterly patronage, "he didn't orter picked the apple."

Jamie nodded without understanding.

"'Ess."

"Wal," went on Scipio, taking advantage of the pause, "he was nigh drownded, an' he had to swim an' swim, an' then he built himself a ranch."

"Barn," cried Sandy, unable to keep quiet any longer. "It was a barn to kep his stock in."

"Ark," said Toby decidedly. "He built a Nore's Ark—same as toys kiddies plays with."

"But Bill said Sunny's yarn goes," protested the troubled Scipio. And, receiving an affirmatory nod from the preoccupied gambler, he went on. "Wal, he set that ranch

afloat, an' put out a boat an' rescued all the other animals, an' bugs, an' spiders, an' things, an' then set out a duck to see how things was going——"

"Not a duck, Zip," said Sunny, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Course not," agreed Sandy scornfully.

"Pigeon," suggested Toby.

But little Vada saved the situation. She jumped to her feet, dragging Jamie with her. Her dark eyes were shining, and her round little cheeks were scarlet with excitement.

"It wasn't a duck, nor a pigeon, nor nothin' but a parrot," she declared. "Momma told us. He sent out a parrot; an' it flew, an' flew, an' flew. An' then it come back to the ark, carryin' a tree in its beak. An' then Nore knew there wasn't no more rain, nor nothing, an' they turned his wife into a pillow o' salt 'cos she'd made him eat the apple. An', pop-pa, tell us another."

"'Ess, a nudder," cried Jamie, his chubby fat legs wabbling under him as he danced about—"a nudder—a nudder—a nud——"

But his lisping request was never completed, for, without a word of warning, Wild Bill suddenly leapt from his seat, and, with a wave of his arm, swept the two children sprawling into their father's lap, while he charged across the clearing. Just for a fraction of a second he paused as he closed on the bush he had so long contemplated, and his friends heard his voice in a furious oath.

"You son of a ——!" he roared; and simultaneously there was a flash and a sharp report from his gun—another, and yet another. Then he vanished into the bush, his smoking revolver still in his hand ready for use, followed, with no less speed, by Toby and Sandy Joyce.

For a moment Scipio stared; but Sunny Oak seemed to grasp something of the situation. He flung himself before the two children, his right hand gripping a revolver which he always carried concealed amongst his rags. And at the same moment the gambler's voice came back to him.

"Huyk them kids right back to the store, an' kep 'em there!" it cried. And instantly the indolent loafer, with a movement almost electrical in its swiftness, seized Vada in

his arms and dashed off up the hill, followed by the little father, bearing the screaming Jamie in his.

Inside the bush the three men searched, with eyes and ears alert in the fashion of furious terriers. The branches and inner leaves were spattered with blood, showing that the gambler's shots had taken some effect. The ground, too, was covered with footprints.

With a rush Bill set off trailing the latter, and so soft was the ground that he had little or no difficulty in the matter. The trail took them along the creek bank, and here and there a splash of blood warned them that their quarry was severely wounded.

But, even so, they were doomed to disappointment. Thirty yards from the clearing they came to a spot where the moist soil was well beaten with horse's hoofs, and here the human footprints ended. All three men stared out down the creek. And then it was that another furious oath escaped the gambler's lips, as he beheld a racing horseman making good his escape, more than a hundred yards below them.

For some moments Wild Bill stood raging impotently. Then he turned on his companions, with a perfect devil glaring out of his ferocious eyes.

"God's curse light on 'em!" he roared. "It's James' gang. May his soul rot. I'll get 'em! I'll get 'em! They're after those kids. But, by the wall-eyed Mackinaw, they shan't touch a hair o' their heads as long as I'm a livin' man. It's war, boys! D'ye hear? It's him an' me. Me —an' James! An' I swar to God he'll go down an' out as sure as my name's Wild Bill!"

CHAPTER XXV

WILD BILL FIRES A BOMB

When Wild Bill returned to his hut later on in the afternoon he was consumed by a cold, hard rage, such as comes but rarely in the life of any man. There was no demonstrativeness: he had no words to give it expression. It was the rage of a man who coldly, calmly collects every faculty of brain and body into one great concentration for harm to its object. It was a moment when every evil thought and feeling was drawn into a cruel longing for harm—harm calculated to be of the most merciless description.

Neither of the companions who had joined him in the pursuit of the man they had discovered lurking down at the river had any real understanding of what lay in the back of the gambler's mind. His outburst there had been the first volcanic rage which had lit the fires of hate now burning so deep down in his intolerant heart. That outburst they had understood. That was the man as they knew him. But this other man they knew nothing of. This was the real man who returned to his hut, silent and ghastly, with implacable hatred burning in his heart.

All three had hurriedly and silently returned to the store from their futile chase. Bill offered no explanation, and his manner was so forbidding that even the intrepid Sandy had found no use for the questions he would so gladly have put.

When they arrived, Scipio and Sunny, with the twins, had reached the place just before them. But they were lost sight of in the rush that was made to tell the gambler of the happenings at Sid Morton's ranch. Nor had he any choice but to listen to the luridly narrated facts. However, his choice did fall in with their desires, and, after the first

brief outline, told with all the imagination this varied collection of beings was capable of, he found himself demanding, as eagerly as they were to tell them, every detail of the matter, and even went so far as to examine the body of the dead rancher, roughly laid out in the barn on a bed of hay. He listened almost without comment, which was unusual in him. His manner displayed no heat. He was cold, critical, and his only words were to ask sharp and definitely pointed questions. Then, having given Minky instructions for the safeguarding of the children, he departed without even mentioning his own adventure down at the river.

But if he neglected to do so, it was otherwise with his friends, the other members of the Trust. The moment his back was turned they shed the story broadcast, each man competing with the other in his endeavour to make it palatable to the sensation-loving ears of their fellow-townsmen. And probably of them all Sandy was the most successful.

In half-an-hour, loyally supported by his friends, he had the whole of Suffering Creek strung to such a pitch of nervous excitement that every man was set looking to his firearms, and all talk was directed towards the most adequate means of defending their homes and property.

In the briefest possible time, from a peaceful, industrious camp, Suffering Creek was transformed into a war base, with every citizen stirred not only to defence of his own, but with a longing to march out to the fray, to seek these land pirates in the open and to exterminate them, as they would willingly exterminate any other vermin.

Men talked war. Brains were feverishly racked for strategy, and for historical accounts of a similar situation in which a town rose to arms and took the law into its own hands. Stories flew from lip to lip, and, as is usual under such stress, so did the convivial glass.

And the result which followed was quite in keeping with the occasion. Quarrels and bickerings occurred, which kept the place at fever-heat until the store closed down for the night and the supply of liquor was cut off. Then slumber brought its beneficent opiate to distracted nerves.

Throughout it all Minky kept his head level. Whatever he felt and thought, he had nothing to offer on the altar of

public suggestion. He knew that of all these irresponsible debaters he had the most to lose. Nor did he feel inclined to expose anything of the risk at which he stood. It was a depressing time for him, so depressing that he could see very little hope. His risk was enormous. He felt that the probability was that this raiding gang were well enough posted as to the store of gold he held in his cellars. He felt that, should James or any of his people decide upon a coup, the attack would be well timed, when the miners were out at their work, and he and the camp generally were left defenceless.

What could he do? He must rid himself of the "dust" somehow. He must dispose of it secretly. A hiding—that seemed to him, amidst his trouble, to be the only thing. But where? That was the thing. He must consult Bill. To his mind Bill was the only man upon whom he could place any real reliance, upon whose judgment he could depend. So, with his shrewd eyes ever on the watch for strangers amongst his customers, he longed for the hours to pass until he could close his store and seek the gambler in his hut.

In the meantime Wild Bill had cut himself off from his fellows, spending the long evening hours in the solitude of his humble dwelling. The man was strangely calm, but his fierce eyes and pale face told of an enormous strain of thought driving him. His mind was sweeping along over a series of vivid pictures of past events, mixed up with equally vivid and strongly marked scenes of possible events to come. He was reviewing silently, sternly, a situation which, by some extraordinary kink in his vanity, he felt it was for him to assume the responsibility of. He felt all unselfconsciously that he, and he alone, could see it through.

The fact of the matter was that, by some strange mental process, James' doings—his approach to the camp, in fact his very existence—had somehow become a direct individual challenge to him. Without acknowledging it to himself, he in some subtle way understood that everything this desperado did was a challenge to him—a sneering, contemptuous challenge to him. James was metaphorically snapping his fingers under his very nose.

That these were his feelings was undeniable. That the

thoughts of the possibilities of an attack on the camp were the mainspring of his antagonism to the man, that his voluntary guardianship of Scipio and his twins was the source of his rage against him, it was impossible to believe. They may have influenced him in a small degree, but only in a small degree. The man was cast in a very different mould from that of a simple philanthropist. It was the man's vanity, the headstrong vanity of a strong and selfish man, that drove him. And as he sat silently raging under his thoughts of the happenings of that day, had he put his paramount feelings into words he would have demanded how James dared to exist in a district which he, Wild Bill of Abilene, had made his own.

He spent the evening sitting on his bed or pacing his little hut, his thoughts tumbling headlong through his brain. He found himself almost absently inspecting his armoury, and loading and unloading his favourite weapons. There was no definite direction in anything he thought or did, unless it were in the overwhelming hatred against James which coloured his every feeling. Without realizing it, every force of mind and body was seeking inspiration.

And the evening was well-nigh spent before inspiration came. Careless of time, of everything but his feelings, he had finally flung himself full length upon his bed, brain-weary and resourceless. Then came the change. As his head touched the pillow it almost seemed to rebound; and he found himself sitting up again glaring at the opposite wall with the desired inspiration in his gimlet eyes.

"Gee!" he breathed, with a force that sent the exclamation hissing through the room.

And for an hour his attitude remained unchanged. His legs were drawn up and his long arms were clasped about his knees. His eyes were fiercely focused upon a cartridge-belt hanging upon the wall, and there they remained, seemingly a fixture, while thought, no longer chaotic, flew through his revivified brain. He gave no sign; he uttered no word. But his face told its story of a fiendish joy which swept from his head to his heart, and thrilled his whole body.

It was in the midst of this that he received a visit from his friend Minky. And the moment the door opened in response to his summons the look in his eyes, when he saw

who his visitor was, was a cordial welcome. He swung round and dropped his legs over the side of his bunk.

"What's the time?" he demanded.

Minky pointed to the alarm-clock on the gambler's table.

"Nigh one o'clock," he said, with a faint smile.

But Bill ignored the quiet sarcasm.

"Good," he cried. Then he brought his eyes to the other's face. They were literally blazing with suppressed excitement. There was something in them, too, that lifted Minky out of his desperate mood. Somehow they suggested hope to him. Somehow the very presence of this man had a heartening effect.

"Say," cried the gambler in a tone that thrilled with power, "this is Sunday. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday," he counted the days off on his lean, muscular fingers. "That's it, sure. Wednesday we send out a 'stage,' an' you're goin' to ship your gold-dust on it. You'll ship it to Spawn City. Meanwhiles you'll buy up all you feel like. Clean the camp out of 'dust,' an' ship it by that stage."

The storekeeper stared. For a moment he thought his friend had taken leave of his senses. A scathing refusal hovered on his lips. But the words never matured. He was looking into the man's burning eyes, and he realized that a big purpose lay behind his words.

"An'," he inquired, with a smile from which he could not quite shut out the irony, "an' whose goin' to—drive it through?"

"I am."

The storekeeper jumped and his eyes widened. He started forward. Then he checked himself. He struggled with a sudden emotion.

"You?" he cried in a sharp whisper. "I—I don't get you."

The gambler leapt to his feet. He strode down the length of the hut and came back again. He finally paused before his bewildered friend.

"No, o' course you don't," he cried hotly; "course you don't. Here, how much 'dust' ken you ship?"

"Maybe we'd need to ship sixty thousand dollars' worth. That is, if we rake around among the boys."

Minky watched his man closely as he spoke. He was still doubting, but he was ready enough to be convinced. He knew it was no use asking too many questions. Wild Bill hated questions. He watched the latter plunge a hand into the inside pocket of his coat and draw out a book. He had no difficulty in recognizing it as the gambler flung it on the table with a force that set the lamp rattling.

"There it is," he cried, with a fierce oath. "Ther's my bank-book. Ther's seventy odd thousand dollars lyin' in the Spawn City bank to my dogasted credit. See? " He glared; then he drew a step nearer and bent forward. "I'm handin' you a check fer your dust," he went on. "I've seventy thousand dollars says I'm a better man than James an' all his rotten scum, an' that I'm goin' to shoot him to hell before the week's out. *Now* d'ye get me? "

Minky gasped. He had always believed he had long since fathomed the depths of his wild friend. He had always believed that the gambler had no moods which were not well known to him. He had seen him under almost every condition of stress. Yet here was a side to his character he had never even dreamed of, and he was flabbergasted.

For a moment he had no words with which to adequately reply, and he merely shook his head. Instantly the other flew into one of his savage paroxysms by which it was so much his habit to carry through his purpose when obstructed.

"You stand there shakin' your fool head like some mosey old cow," he cried, with a ruddy flush suddenly mounting to his temples. "An' you'll go on shakin' it till ther' ain't 'dust' enuff in your store to bury a louse. You'll go on shakin' it till James' gun rips out your vitals. Gee! " He threw his arms above his head appealingly. "Give me a man," he cried. Then he brought one fist crashing down upon the table and shouted his final words: "Say, you'll get right out an' post the notices. I'm buyin' your 'dust,' an' I'm drivin' the stage."

CHAPTER XXVI

WILD BILL INSPECTS HIS CLAIM

SUFFERING CREEK awoke on the Monday morning labouring under a hideous depression of nightmare. There was no buoyancy in the contemplation of the day's "prospect." It was as though that wholesome joy of life which belongs to the "outdoor" man had suddenly been snatched away, and only the contemplation of a dull round of unprofitable labour had been left for the burdened mind to dwell upon.

It was in this spirit that Joe Brand rubbed his eyes and pulled on his moleskin trousers. It was in this spirit that the miner, White, slouching along to the store for breakfast, saw and greeted him.

"Nuthin' doin' in the night," he said, in something like the tone of a disappointed pessimist.

"No." Joe Brand did not feel a great deal like talking. Besides the nightmare depression that held him he had drunk a good deal of rye whisky overnight.

White stared out across the creek, whither his thoughts were still wandering.

"Maybe we—was scairt some," he observed, with a hollow laugh.

"Maybe."

Joe's manner was discouraging.

"Gettin' breakfast?" the other inquired presently.

"Guess so."

And the rest of the journey to the store was made in morose silence.

Others were already astir when they reached their destination. And at some distance they beheld a small group of men clustering at one point on the veranda. But such was their mood that the matter had no interest whatever for them

until they came within hailing distance. Then it was that they were both startled into new life. Then it was that all depression was swept away and active interest leapt. Then it was that sore heads and troubled thoughts gave way before an excitement almost equal to the previous day's, only that it carried with it a hope which the latter had almost killed.

"Say, don't it beat hell?" demanded a burly prospector as they came up, pointing back at the wall of the store where the group was clustering like a swarm of bees.

"Don't what?" inquired Brand, with only partial interest.

"Why, that," cried the man, still pointing. "Ther' it is, all writ up ther'. It's in Minky's writin', too. They're sendin' out a stage, Wednesday. Git a peek at it."

But Brand and his companion did not wait for his final suggestion. They, too, had already joined the cluster, and stood craning on the outskirts of it. Yes, there it was, well chalked out in Minky's bold capitals—an invitation to all his customers to trade all the gold they chose to part with to him at the usual rates, or to ship direct to the bank at Spawn City by a stage that was to leave Suffering Creek at eight o'clock on Wednesday morning, its safe delivery insured, at special rates, by the storekeeper himself.

It was the most astounding notice, under the circumstances, ever seen on Suffering Creek, and as the citizens read it excitement surged to a tremendous pitch.

The man called Van expressed something of the thought in every mind as he turned to Brand, who happened to be at his side.

"Gee!" he cried, with ironical levity. "Old Minky's plum 'bug.' He's waited to 'unload' till James' gang has got the camp held up three miles out. Wal, I ain't shippin'. Guess I'll trade my dust at a discount. It's a sight easier carryin' United States currency."

"But he's guaranteein' delivery at the bank," protested Brand.

"That's what it sez, sure," observed White doubtfully.

"It beats me," said the burly miner perplexedly, again drawn to the notice by the apparent recklessness of its purport. "It beats me sure," he reiterated. Then, after a thoughtful

pause, he went back to his original statement as something that expressed the limit of his understanding "It sure do beat hell."

So it was throughout the morning. And by noon every soul in the camp had seen or heard of Minky's contemplated recklessness. The place was wild with excitement, and, instead of setting out for their various claims for the usual day's work, every man went out to scrape together any "dust" he possessed, and brought it in to trade.

And Minky bought with perfect good-humour, discounting at the recognized tariff, but always with solemn eyes, and a mind still wondering at his overnight interview with Wild Bill. He had obeyed him implicitly, knowing that he was making a liberal profit for himself, whatever the gambler might be risking. All his transactions were guaranteed for him by the small fortune which Bill possessed safely deposited in the Spawn City bank. Well, it was not for him to hesitate.

But his trading was not carried on without comment and questioning. Besides which, there was a heap of rough sarcasm and satire to put up with from his customers. But he put up with it. He could afford to. And to the closest questioning he had always one answer, and no enlightenment could they drag out of him.

"The stage goes, boys," he told them. "An', personal, I ain't scairt a cent's-worth of James an' his gang. Though, to see the way you'se fellers are fallin' over yourselves to make trade with me, I guess I know some folks as is."

The marvel of the whole thing confounded the public mind. But the selfishness of human nature demanded that advantage should be taken of the situation. If Minky, who recently had jibbed at trading gold, had suddenly eased the market, well, it was "up to him." It was his "funeral." The public jumped at the chance of realizing, and so relieving themselves of the cloud of trouble threatening them. James could come along with a whole army of desperadoes, once they had rid themselves of their "dust." They then would no longer have anything to lose except their lives, and those they were always prepared to risk in anything so enterprising as a little honest gun-play.

It was noon when Wild Bill was stirring. And he listened to the news which greeted him on every hand with a calmly non-committal air. Nor, when he found it necessary to comment, did he hesitate to do so in his usual sharp, decided fashion.

"Minky's good grit," he declared on one occasion to a puzzled miner. "I don't guess ther's many folks around as 'ud take his chances. I allow Sufferin' Creek needs to be proud of sech a feller."

And his attitude promptly set up a new feeling in the camp. Minky's heroic pose had not struck the people before. But now the full force of it struck home in a manner which suddenly raised him to a great pinnacle of popularity. The storekeeper of Suffering Creek was standing between the camp and possible financial disaster. It was noble. It was splendid. Yes, they had reason to be very thankful to him.

Bill contemplated the notice long and earnestly when his attention was first called to it. And his narrow eyes lit and twinkled as he read down the carefully chalked capitals. Minky had certainly done it well. But then Minky did most things well. He read it down a second time, and then pushed his way into the store. It was some time before he could reach his friend, but finally he got him to himself as he was poring over a big cash-book. The storekeeper looked up. Nor had he any greeting for his visitor. He was still dazed at the gambler's purpose. And somehow it was the latter who had to speak first.

"You done it good, Minky," he said amiably.

"Ther'll be sixty thousand dollars," the storekeeper mumbled doubtfully.

"Good."

"Good?"

"Sure." Bill turned and gazed out of the window. "It needs to be a big pile. Makes things surer."

"Surer? I don't get you."

"No; that's so." The gambler turned back to the other abruptly. "Say, you get busy an' gas. Gas till you get the camp yappin' like coyotes. Tell 'em the stage is sure carryin' sixty thousand dollars' worth o' good red gold." Then his manner suddenly changed and he laughed. "Say, I'm jest

goin' out to get a peek at my claim. I sure guess I bought a dandy rich claim o' Zip."

"You orter know," said Minky, with a shake of the head. "I sure don't seem to understand——"

"Course you don't," cried Bill, with strange good-nature. Then his eyes became curiously reflective. "Wher's Zip?"

"Zip? Guess he's around with the kids. Y'see, the Bird's helpin' him fix things. Maybe they're back in the dinin'-room."

Bill stood for a moment in deep thought. Then he turned suddenly, and his fierce little eyes fixed themselves on his friend's face.

"Them kids," he said sharply. "Maybe I'll get you to kep 'em safe right here fer three days an' more. After that we'll see." Then in a moment his expression lightened and he laughed. "Guess I'll get Zip to come along an' show me the claim."

Half-an-hour later the gambler was striding down the river bank, with Scipio hurrying along at his side. Several times the little man had endeavoured to engage his companion in amiable conversation. He wanted to talk about the episode at the river, but Bill would have none of it. Nor was it until he was nearly half-way to their destination, where Sandy Joyce was already at work, that he broke the silence in which he had wrapped himself.

They had just emerged from a narrow cattle-track where they had been forced to walk in single file on account of the bush which grew in such abundance on either side of it. Bill was leading, and as the path widened into a clearing, in which lay several fallen trees rooted out of the ground by some long-passed flood of the creek, he suddenly turned about and faced his diminutive friend.

"Here," he said, "we'll set here a piece. Guess we need to talk some." He glanced quickly about, and finally flung himself upon the nearest tree-trunk. "Set," he cried, pointing at another trunk lying opposite to him.

Scipio wonderingly complied. He stood in considerable awe of the gambler, and now he was ransacking his brain to discover the object of this desire for a talk. He could find no

adequate reason, except it might be that Bill was repenting of his bargain in purchasing a half-share in his claim. Yes, it might be that. It probably was that. He had no doubt bought on inaccurate information. Scipio knew how misleading and how wild many of the reports which flew about Suffering Creek were. Besides, he was certain that Bill's information about his claim, wherever he had got it from, was inaccurate. Yes, no doubt this was what he wanted to talk about, and the honest-minded man promptly decided that the gambler should have no cause to blame him. He need have no doubts. He would by no means hold him to the bargain. He would return the money——

Suddenly he remembered. He had already spent five dollars of it, and he went hot and cold at the thought. He had nothing with which to replace it.

However, he took no further thought, and, as Bill still remained silent, he plunged into the matter at once.

"I got most all the money with me," he began, in his vague way expecting the other to understand his meaning. "That is, all but fi' dollars. Y'see, the kids needed——"

Bill's sharp eyes reached his face with a jump.

"Wot in the name o' blazes——" he cried.

But Scipio did not let him continue.

"I knew ther' wa'an't no gold showin' on my claim," he hurriedly explained. "So I'll jest hand you back your dollars."

"Square-toed mackinaw!" the gambler cried, his face scarlet. Then he broke out into one of his harsh laughs. "Say," he went on, with pretended severity, "you can't squeal that way. I'm in haf your claim, an' I ain't lettin' up my holt on it fer—fer nobody an' nuthin'. Get that right here. You can't bluff me."

Scipio flushed. He somehow felt very small. The last thing he wanted Bill to think was that he was trying to do him an injury.

"I'm sorry," he said helplessly. "Y'see, I thought, you needing to talk to me, you wanted, maybe, to quit my claim."

He turned away, gazing down the wood-lined river. Somehow he could not face the gambler's stern eyes. Had he seen the sudden softening in them the moment the other

was sure he was unobserved, he might have been less troubled. But the gambler had no soft side when men's eyes were upon him.

"'Tain't about your claim I need to talk," Bill said, after a brief pause. His voice was less harsh, and there was an unusual thoughtfulness in its tone. "It's—it's—— Say, Zip, I ain't fergot our talk out there on the trail." He nodded his head out in the direction of Spawn City. "You mind that talk when you was puttin' up that fool proposition o' handin' James that kid?"

Scipio's eyes had come back to his companion, and their expression had suddenly dropped to one of hopeless regret. His heart was stirred to its depths by the reference to the past trouble which lay like a cankerous sore so deep down in it.

He nodded. But otherwise he had no words.

"You're needin' your wife?" Bill went on brusquely.

Again Scipio nodded. But this time words came, too.

"But you was right," he said. "I saw it all after. I was plumb wrong. An'—an' I ain't holding you to—what you said. You jest wanted to put me right. I understood that—after."

Bill stirred uneasily, and kicked a protruding limb of the tree on which he sat.

"You're a heap ready to let me out," he cried, with a return to his harshest manner. "Who in blazes are you to say I don't need to do the—things I said I'd do? Jest wait till you're ast to." He turned away, and Scipio was left troubled and wondering.

But suddenly the lean body swung round again, and the little prospector felt the burning intensity of the man's eyes as they concentrated on his flushing face.

"You're needin' your wife?" he jerked out.

"More'n all the world," the little man cried, with emotion.

"Would you put up a—a scrap fer her?"

"With anybody."

The corners of Bill's mouth wrinkled, but his eyes remained hard and commanding. Whatever feelings of an appreciative nature lay behind his lean face they were well hidden.

"You'd face James an' all his gang—again? You'd face him if it sure meant—death?"

"The chance o' death wouldn't stop me if I could get her back."

The quiet of the little man's tone carried a conviction far greater than any outburst could have done.

"An' she's been—his?"

Scipio took a deep breath. His hands clenched. Just for a moment the whites of his eyes became bloodshot with some rush of tremendous feeling. It seemed as though he were about to break out into verbal expression of his agony of heart. But when he finally did speak it was in the same even tone, though his breath came hard and deep.

"I want her—whatever she is," he said quietly.

Bill rose to his feet, and a passionate light shone in his sparkling eyes.

"Then take Minky's mule an' buckboard. Start right out fer James' ranch before sun-up Wednesday mornin', an'—you'll sure get her. Come on."

Scipio sprang to his feet, and a dozen hot questions leapt to his mind. An ocean of gratitude was struggling to pour from his inadequate tongue, but Bill would have none of it. He waved him aside and set off for their destination, and the other could only follow. But at the farther edge of the clearing again the gambler paused. This time a sudden thought had changed his plans. He turned, and without one particle of softening in his manner he ordered him back.

"Say," he cried, "ther' ain't no use fer you to get around further. You ken jest light back to the store, an' see to them kids. Don't you never let 'em out o' your sight till Wednesday come. Then hit out fer James' ranch."

When Wild Bill eventually reached the claim, he found Sandy sitting on an upturned bucket amidst the most deplorable surroundings in which a gold prospector in quest of the precious metal could ever hope to find himself.

The creek bank was some two hundred yards away, with a pronounced rising ground between him and it. Behind him was a great cut-faced rock of ironstone that certainly looked auriferous. The base of it lay in a definite hollow, reed-grown and oozy. Beyond him, to the right, following the river bank, the ground declined gradually towards a black-

looking, turgid and overgrown swamp. While, from the direction in which the gambler approached, a low, dense thorny bush grew, made up of branches almost skeleton in their lack of leaves. It was a forlorn and uninviting spot, calculated to dishearten anybody with a heart less big and an enthusiasm less vital than Scipio's.

Bill stood for a moment surveying the scene before Sandy realized his presence. And that first glance set him snorting contemptuously.

"Well, say——" he began. But words failed him, and he hurried across to his "hired" man.

Sandy jumped up as he came near, and before the other could stop him had poured out his opinion of things in general, and that claim in particular, in a few well-chosen and effective words.

"Say, Zip orter sure be shot or hanged," he cried angrily, "an' this doggone claim o' mud needs to be boosted through a dogasted volcany an' blowed out the other side o' no sort o' place at all. Ther' sure ain't nuthin' worse in the world than the foolishness of a tow-headed fool."

But Bill ignored the outburst.

"How much gold you found?" he inquired coldly.

Sandy's indignant eyes blazed.

"Gold? Pea-shucks!" he roared, with a furious oath. "An' I tell you right here I ain't to be made no fool of. You ken take this mule-headed job an'—an'—well, you ken take it. I quit right here."

But again Bill ignored his outburst. There was not a vestige of expression in his face as he moved across to the mouth of a shaft Scipio had been sinking before his work had been interrupted by the going of his wife. He looked into it and pointed.

"Guess you best get right on makin' this hole deeper. Ther' ain't nuthin' like diggin' to find out. Zip's sure a wise guy. I don't guess I know what you'll likely find—but—you best kep diggin'. That's sure his notion."

Sandy went purple in the face, and spluttered violently in his attempt to speak. Finally, when he did get his words out, it was only to repeat his decision.

"It's jest a mud swamp," he cried, "an' I quit."

Bill turned swiftly. His movements were almost cat-like as he came up and peered into Sandy's face.

"You'll kep right on diggin' that hole," he said, with an icy threat. "An' come Wednesday you'll quit diggin' an' hit the trail on Zip's track—you an' Sunny an' Toby—an' you'll sure see no harm comes to him. But he ain't to see you, nor to know you're chasin' him. An' you ain't to stop him, no matter what fool trick he gets playin'. Get me?"

Sandy's choler died out before the other's purpose. He suddenly realized that his work on the claim was not of any great consequence to his employer, that Bill had other thoughts, other schemes in his head, and that he, Sandy, was to have his place in them. He nodded.

"I get you," he said. "But——"

"Ther' ain't no 'buts,'" interrupted Bill. "You're goin' to do as I sez. Meanwhiles you're goin' right on diggin' that hole, to earn your dollars."

And without another word he turned and hurried away towards the mouth of the trail whence he had appeared.

CHAPTER XXVII

SUSPENSE

It was nearly sundown. A chilly mist was stealing down the slopes of the surrounding hills. It densified to a ruddy fog as it caught the glow of the evening sun, and finally settled upon the valley. And with each passing moment the hills seemed to recede, their outlines to grow more indistinct and ghostly. And gradually the whole prospect took on the depressing aspect of a day dying wearily.

Had Jessie been less preoccupied as she stood at the door of the ranch-house she might have felt something of all this. But she heeded nothing of the hour, and saw nothing of the picture before her. Her eyes only visualized the scenes that a world of troubled and apprehensive thought yielded her. Her mind and heart were full of a great terror, a terror which left her helpless and dazed.

She stirred restlessly. Time and again she changed her position. Now she was leaning against one casing of the doorway, now against the other. A nervous glance over her shoulder, as some sound in the darkness of the room behind her set her shivering, told of the state of her nerves, as also, with ears ever on the alert, her fearful glances at a definite spot in the rapidly dimming hills told of a straining, harassed expectancy. Her nerves were almost at breaking-point. Her handsome face was drawn and haggard. All the youthful freshness seemed to have vanished from it for ever, leaving her radiant eyes shadowed and hopeless. It was a painful change. But the outward and visible signs were nothing to the changes that had taken place within her.

Thirty yards away a decrepit choreman was making pretence of some work upon a corral fence. But it was only pretence. His real occupation was espionage. His red-

rimmed eyes never for a moment lost sight of his master's woman when she showed herself in the open. A curious-looking dog of immense proportions, half mastiff, half Newfoundland, squatted on its haunches at his side, alternating his green-eyed attention between a watchful regard for the hand that fed and thrashed it and the woman at the doorway. There was not much to choose between the faces of these wardens of the ranch. Both were cruel, both were intensely vicious. In neither pair of eyes was there any friendliness for the woman. And it needed little imagination to understand that both possessed to the full all the instincts of the savage watch-dog.

But Jessie had no thought for either. Her own terrible thoughts and feelings held her. It is doubtful if she was even aware of their presence at all. Just now one thought stood out dominant in her mind. She was expecting the return of—James. And the return of James meant—— She shuddered.

He was returning from his expedition in the neighbourhood of Suffering Creek, and this knowledge brought with it the remembrance that his object was to give her possession of at least one of her children. Distracted as she was with her mother's desire for possession of her offspring, although the man was now only obeying her expressed wishes, she dreaded the child's coming almost as much as she dreaded her lover's return. The thought of seeing Vada in this man's arms maddened her to such a degree that she was well-nigh beside herself.

For two whole days now had she brooded under a cloud of despair. She had scarcely stirred out of her room; she had eaten scarcely enough to sustain life. She had shut herself up, a prey to harrowing remorse and terror—a remorse which she knew to be as useless as her terror was nerve-racking. Her awakening had come, sudden, awful. And, like all such awakenings, it had come too late, so that the horror of her future was written in letters of fire before her mental eyes, a fire which burnt into her broken heart and left her in the depths of an unutterable despair.

It was on the morning of her lover's departure for the region of Suffering Creek that the awakening had come. It

had come with an overwhelming rush of horror which, in the midst of her dressing, had sent her reeling and fainting upon the bed from which she had only just risen, and where for two hours she had subsequently lain in a state of collapse.

She was brushing her hair, her mind busy with the pleasant thought that shortly she was to have one of her children with her again. She knew that her appeal to her husband had failed, but James had sworn to keep his promise, and now he was setting out for that expressed purpose. And such was her foolish woman's blind faith that she had no doubts. When he returned he was to bring, at least, little Vada with him. The fresh mountain air was doubly pleasant to her that morning. The brilliant sunlight raised her spirits. All qualms of conscience were thrust into the background, and she was as nearly happy as earthly interest could make her.

She could see the crowded corrals from where she stood. She could hear the bellowing of the restless cattle as they pushed and horned each other in their forceful, bovine desire to get out to the succulent grass of their beloved pastures. All the men were astir, preparing for their lawless expedition. The saddle-horses, ready for the trail, were hitched to the corral fences. Through the open window she could hear her lover ordering and hectoring, as was his way of dealing with the ruffians who served under his leadership; and a thrill of excitement, a subtle sympathy, stirred her. She moved to the window, leaving her beautiful hair flowing in the bright air, and stood watching for the departure.

Then came that hideous thing which was to shadow all her future life. It came almost without warning. In a flash, it seemed, the last tinge of romance was swept from her thoughts, and the hideous skeleton of reality was laid bare.

The men had tightened up the cinchas of their saddles, and passed the reins over their horses' heads, ready to mount. She watched them all with something very like admiration in her blinded eyes. Their hard, desperate faces did not appear so to her. These things, in her foolish mind, were the hall-mark of reckless courage, of strong, virile manhood. They were men who feared nothing, who cared no more for their own lives than they would care for the life of an enemy. And somehow this seemed to her just as it should be.

She waited to see them mount their raw-boned bronchos. But somehow there was a delay; and in this delay a change came over the scene. The men drifted away from their horses and gathered into groups. They stood whispering together with faces averted from their leader. A feeling of apprehension somehow caught hold of her. She did not understand why, but she felt that all was not right. She turned to James, and saw that he was moving round his horse all unconcernedly, and she wondered if he were aware of the change in his men.

But all further speculation was abruptly checked, for at that moment she heard the leader issue one of his sharp orders. She did not quite catch his words, but she noticed that no one moved or attempted to comply. Only talk ceased instantly. Then she saw the handsome face of her lover flush, as he glanced about him at this unusual phenomenon, and in a moment she recognized the sudden savage anger that flashed into his eyes. Simultaneously his hand dropped to the butt of one of his guns.

Then she heard his words, as they were shouted to the accompaniment of a string of vicious oaths.

"Ho, you, Ned, an' you, too, Sully!" he cried fiercely, "get your ears flappin'. Huyk that rotten skunk Conroy out. I ain't tellin' you again."

The woman had thrilled at his words. There was such command, such fearlessness in them, in his whole poise. She felt, too, that there was trouble looming. There was rebellion in the air. Her excitement rose, and her sympathies were all for this one man.

The two men indicated suddenly bestirred themselves, and moved off under their leader's eye. The rest drifted together —eight of them, she found herself counting. And as they drew together a murmur arose.

Instantly James' gun flew from its holster; and he stood, the personification of cold authority.

"Another word an' I empty this into your lousy hides!" she heard him cry. And instantly the murmur died out.

But the threatening weapon did not return to its holster. James stood there waiting. And presently she beheld the two men he had despatched returning, bringing in their

custody, tottering awkwardly between them, the man Abe Conroy, with his arms tightly fastened behind his back, and a pair of horse-hobbles securing his ankles. They came slowly, for the hobbles allowed but little play, and halted less than five yards away from their leader.

As they paused the woman shivered. Some premonition of what was about to happen got hold of her, and struck terror to her heart. She stood staring now, unable to move. A hideous fascination seemed to paralyze her.

The next thing that reached her comprehension was that James was speaking in a harsh metallic voice. She had never heard him speak like that before, and her fears swiftly increased as his words floated in through the open window.

"Now, you skunk," he was saying, "you guess you're man enough to run this lay-out. You guess you're a bigger man than me. You guess you got me squealin' around like a suckin' kid. You! An' I took you out o' gaol, wher' they was goin' to set you swingin'. Gee! I could tell you a heap, but I ain't no time talkin' to bastards of your kidney. Swingin's too good fer sech as you. Anyway, when I got work to do I do it myself. Here, you, Ned, an' you, Sully, stand aside!"

She saw the two men withdraw. She wanted to scream, without quite knowing why. But no sound came. Her eyes were starting out of her head with the horror of what she knew to be about to happen. But she had no power to stir hand or foot.

She saw James move forward. She saw the bloodless, horror-stricken face of the prisoner. She saw him stumble as he attempted to move away. There was no escape.

James moved forward with body crouching, and strides that covered the intervening space with almost feline stealth.

He came right up to the man, his gun leading. She heard a report and one dreadful cry of terror and pain. She saw Conroy crumple and fall writhing upon the ground. She saw the blood streaming from his stomach. Then the further horror came to her staring eyes as she saw James stand over his victim and fire shot after shot into the hideous, writhing heap.

But the limit was reached. With one wild scream she

turned away and flung herself upon her bed; and the next moment everything mercifully became a blank to her.

That was on the Sunday morning. She saw nothing of what followed. She knew nothing until she awoke some two hours later to the haunting vision of the scene she had witnessed. And ever since it had clung to her—clung like an obsession, a mental parasite sapping her nerve, her very reason. Nor had she power to disassociate herself from it.

And now she was waiting in an agony of mind for the murderer's return. Not only was she waiting for his return, but she expected to see him bearing in his arms one of her own innocent children. The thought of little Vada in his arms drove her frantic. Her innocent little Vada in the arms of this cold-blooded assassin!

She knew him now for all he was. The scales had fallen from her foolish eyes. All the romance of his hideous calling had passed in a flash, and she saw it as it was. She had no words to express her feelings of horror and revolting. In her weakness and wickedness she had torn herself out of the life of a good man to fling herself upon the bosom of this black-hearted villain. She loathed him; she loathed his very name. But more than all else she loathed herself. Her punishment was terrible. She was so helpless, so powerless. She knew it, and the knowledge paralyzed her thought. What could she do? She knew she was watched, and any move to get away would be at once frustrated. She could do nothing—nothing.

No longer able to remain in her room, she had come out to breathe air which she vainly hoped was less contaminated with the crimes of the man whose home she had elected to share. But inside or out it made no difference. The haunting was not of the place. It was in her mind; it had enveloped her whole consciousness.

But through it all there was one longing, one yearning for all that she had lost, all she had wantonly thrown away. Suffering Creek, with its poverty-stricken home on the dumps, suggested paradise to her now. She yearned as only a mother can yearn for the warm caresses of her children. She longed for the honest love of the little man whom, in the days of her arrogant womanhood, she had so mercilessly despised. All

his patient kindliness came back to her now. All his tremendous, if misdirected, effort on her behalf, his never-failing loyalty and courage, were things which to her, in her misery, were the most blessed of all blessings. She wanted home—home. And in that one bitter cry of her heart was expressed the awakening of her real womanhood.

But it had come too late—too late. There was no home now for her but the home of this man. There was no husband for her, only the illicit love of this man. Her children—she could only obtain them by a theft. And as this last thought came to her she remembered who it was who must commit the theft.

The thought brought a fresh terror. How would he accomplish his end? Had not Scipio tacitly refused to yield up her children? Then how—how? She shivered. She knew the means James would readily, probably only too gladly, adopt. Her husband, the little harmless man who had always loved her, would be swept aside like any one else who stood in the way. James would shoot him down as he had shot Conroy down; even, she fancied, he would shoot him down for the wanton amusement of destroying his life.

Oh no, no! It was too horrible. He was her husband, the first man she had ever cared for. She thought of all they had been to each other. Her mind sped swiftly over past scenes which had so long been forgotten. She remembered his gentleness, his kindly thought for her, his self-effacement where her personal comforts were in question, his devotion both to herself and her children. Every detail of their disastrous married life sped swiftly before her straining mental vision, leaving the man standing out something greater than a hero to her yearning heart. And she had flung it all away in a moment of passion. She had blinded herself in the arrogance of her woman's vanity. Gone, gone. And now she was the mistress of a common assassin.

So she lashed herself with the torture of repentance and regret as the darkness fell. She did not stir from her post. The damp of the mist was unnoticed, the chill of the air. She was waiting for that return which was to claim her to an earthly hell, than which she could conceive no greater—

waiting like the condemned prisoner, numb, helpless, fearful lest the end should come unobserved.

The ranch wardens waited, too. The man cursed his charge with all the hatred of an evil nature, as the damp penetrated to his mean bones. The dog, too, grew restless, but where his master was, there was his place. He had long since learned that—to his cost.

The night crept on, and there was no change in the position, except that the man sought the sheltering doorway of one of the barns, and covered his damp shirt with a jacket. But the woman did not move. She was beyond all conception of time. She was beyond any thought of personal comfort or fatigue. All she knew was that she must wait—wait for the coming of her now hated lover, that at least she might snatch her child from his contaminating arms. And after that —well, after that—— She had no power to think of the afterwards.

The moon rose amidst the obscurity of the fog. It mounted, and at last reached a height where its silvery light could no longer be denied by the low-lying mists. But its reign was brief. Its cold splendour rapidly began to shrink before the pink dawn, and in less than two hours it was but a dim white circle set in the azure of the new-born day.

Still the woman remained at her post, her dark eyes straining with her vigil. She was drenched to the skin with the night-mists, but the chill of her body was nothing to the chill of her heart. The spy was still at his post in the barn doorway, but he was slumbering, as was his canine servitor, lying curled up at his feet. The sun rose, the mists cleared. And now the warming of day stirred the cattle in the corrals.

Suddenly the waiting woman started. Her attention had never once relaxed. She moved out with stiffened joints, and, shading her eyes with her hand, stared into the gleaming sunlight. Her ears had caught the distant thud of horses' hoofs, and now her eyes confirmed. Away down the valley she could see the dim outline of a number of horsemen riding towards the ranch.

Her heart began to thump in her bosom, and her limbs quaked under her. What could she do? What must she do? Every thought, every idea that her long vigil had suggested

was swept from her mind. A blank helplessness held her in its grip. She could only wait for what was to come.

The pounding of hoofs grew louder, the figures grew bigger. They were riding out of the sun, and her eyes were almost blinded as she looked for that which she trembled to behold. She could not be certain of anything yet, except that the return of her lover was at hand.

Nearer, nearer they came. Nearer, nearer still. Then suddenly a sharp exclamation broke from the watcher. It was a cry which had in it a strange thrill. It might have been the gasp of the condemned man at the sound of the word "reprieve." It might have been the cry of one momentarily relieved from years of suffering.

She could see them plainly. For now the figures were no longer silhouetted against the sun. They had changed their course as they neared the ranch, and the rising sun was well clear. She could even recognize them by their horses. She counted. There were ten of them. One was missing. Who? But her interest was only momentary. She recognized the leader, and after that nothing else concerned her.

She could not mistake him. He sat his dark brown horse differently to anybody else. He looked to be part of it. But there was no admiration in her eyes. And yet there was an expression in them that had not been in them since his departure. There was hope in her eyes, and something akin to joy in her whole attitude. James was riding empty-handed!

Hence her cry. But now she glanced swiftly at each horseman, to be sure that they, too, were empty-handed. Yes, each man was riding with the loose swinging arms of the prairie man. And with a sigh that contained in it every expression of an unbounded relief she turned and vanished into the house. For the time, at least, Vada was safe.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JAMES

JAMES clattered into the empty sitting-room and stared about him. His dark face was flushed with excitement. The savage in him was stirred to its best mood, but it was still the savage. He grinned as he realized that the room was empty, and it was a grin of amusement. Some thought in his mind gave him satisfaction, in spite of the fact that there was no one to greet him.

The grin passed and left him serious. Even his excitement had abated. He had remembered Jessie's scream at the scene she must have witnessed. He remembered that he had left her fainting. With another quick glance round he stood and called—

"Ho, you! Jess!"

There was no answer; and he called again, this time his handsome face darkening. He had seen her from a distance outside the house, so there was no doubt of her being about.

Still he received no answer.

An oath followed. But just as he was about to call again he heard the sound of a skirt beyond the inner door. Instantly he checked his impulse, and where before his swift-rising anger had shone in his eyes a smile now greeted Jessie as she opened the door and entered the room.

For a moment no verbal greeting passed between them. The man was taking in every detail of her face and figure, much as a connoisseur may note the points of some precious purchase he is about to make, or a glutton may contemplate a favourite dish. He saw nothing in her face of the effects of the strain through which she had passed. To him her eyes were the same wonderful, passionate depths that had first drawn his reckless manhood to flout every risk in hunting his

quarry down. Her lips were the same rich, moist, enticing lips he had pressed to his in those past moments of passion. The rounded body was unchanged. Yes, she was very desirable.

But he was too sure of his ground to notice that there was no responsive admiration in the woman's eyes. And perhaps it was as well. She was looking at him with eyes wide open to what he really was, and all the revolting of her nature was uppermost. She loathed him as she might some venomous reptile. She loathed him and feared him. His body might have been the body of an Apollo, his face the most perfect of God's creations. She knew him now for the cold-blooded murderer he was, and so she loathed and feared him.

There were stains upon his cotton shirt-sleeves, upon the bosom of it showing between the fronts of his unbuttoned waistcoat. There were stains upon his white moleskin trousers.

"Blood," she said, pointing. And something of her feelings must have been plain to any but his infatuated ears.

He laughed. It was a cruel laugh.

"Sure," he cried. "It was a great scrap. We took nigh a hundred head of Sid Morton's cattle and burnt him out."

"And the blood?"

"Guess it must be his, or—Luke Tedby's." His face suddenly darkened. "That mutton-headed gambler over on Suffering Creek did him up. I had to carry him to shelter—after he got away."

But Jessie paid little attention. She was following up her own thought.

"It isn't—Conroy's?"

James' eyes grew cold.

"That seems to worry you some," he cried coldly. Then he put the thing aside with a laugh. "You'll get used to that sort of talk after you've been here awhile. Say, Jess——"

"I can never get used to—murder."

The woman's eyes were alight with a sombre fire. She had no idea of whither her words and feelings were carrying her. All her best feelings were up in arms, and she, too, was touched now with the reckless spirit which drove these people.

There was no hope for her future. There was no hope whithersoever she looked. And now that she had seen her children were still safe from the life she had flung herself into, she cared very little what happened to her.

But the cruel despot, to whom life and death were of no account whatsoever, was not likely to deal tenderly long with the woman he desired did she prove anything but amenable. Now her words stung him as they were meant to sting, and his mouth hardened.

"You're talking foolish," he cried in that coldly metallic way she had heard him use before. "Conroy got all he needed. Maybe he deserved more. Anyhow, ther's only one man running this lay-out, and I'm surely that man. Say—" again he changed. This time it was a change back to something of the lover she knew, and at once he became even more hateful to her—"things missed fire at—the Creek. I didn't get hands on your kids. I——"

"I'm glad." Jessie could have shouted aloud her joy, but the man's look of surprise brought caution, and she qualified her words. "No; we'd best leave them, after all," she said. "You see, these men——"

She looked fearlessly into his face. She was acting as only a woman can act when the object of her affections is threatened.

And her lover warmed all unsuspiciously. It would have been better for her had she only realized her power over him. But she was not clever. She was not even brave.

James nodded.

"Sure," he said; and with that monosyllable dismissed the subject from his mind for matters that gave him savage delight. "Say, we've had a good round-up," he went on—"a dandy haul. But we're going to do better—oh yes, much better." Then his smile died out. He had almost forgotten the woman in the contemplation of what he had in his mind. This man was wedded to his villainies. They came before all else. Jessie was his; he was sure of her. She was his possession, and he took her for granted now. The excitement of his trade had once again become paramount.

"Guess Sufferin' Creek has gone plumb crazy," he went on delightedly. "I've had boys around to keep me posted. They

been spotting things. Old Minky has been sittin' so tight I guessed I'd have to raid the store for his gold; an' now they've opened out. That buzzy-headed old fool's goin' to send out a stage loaded down with dust. It starts Wednesday morning, an' he guesses it's to win through to Spawn City. Gee! An' they're shoutin' about it. Say, Jess, they say it's to carry sixty thousand dollars. Well, it won't carry it far. That's why I'm back here now. That's why I quit worrying with your kids when Wild Bill did up Luke. We hustled home to change our plugs, an' are hittin' the trail again right away. Sixty thousand dollars! Gee! what a haul! Say, when I've taken that "—he moved a step nearer and dropped his voice —"we're goin' to clear out of this—you an' me. Those guys out there ain't never going to touch a cent. You leave that to me. We'll hit for New Mexico, and to hell with the north country. Say, Jess, ain't that fine? Fine?" he went on, with a laugh. "It's fine as you are."

She had no answer for him. And he went on quite heedlessly, lost in admiration of his own scheme, and joy at the prospect—

"We'll settle down to an elegant little ranch, most respectable like. You can go to church. Ha, ha! Yes, you can go to church all reg'lar. You can make clothes fer the poor, an' go to sociables an' things. An' meanwhiles I can slip across the border and gather up a few things—just to keep my hand in——"

"What time are we gettin' out?"

James swung round with the alertness of a panther. One of the men was standing in the doorway, a burly ruffian whose face was turned to his leader, but whose cruel eyes were rudely fixed on the woman.

"In haf-an-hour," cried James, with a swift return to his harsh command. "Tell the boys to vittle for three days an' roll a blanket. We'll need 'em fer sleep. An', say," he cried, with sudden threat, "don't you git around here again till I call you. Get me?"

There was no mistaking his anger at the interruption. There was no mistaking his meaning. The man slunk away. But as James turned back to the woman his previous lightness had gone, and his ill-humour found savage expression.

"There's some one else needing a lesson besides Conroy," he snarled.

Jessie shivered.

"He didn't mean harm," she protested weakly.

"Harm? Harm? He was staring at you. You ain't fer sech scum as him to stare at. I'll have to teach him."

The man was lashing himself to that merciless fury Jessie had once before witnessed, and now she foolishly strove to appease him. She laughed. It was a forced laugh, but it served her purpose, for the man's brow cleared instantly, and his thoughts diverted to a full realization of her presence, and all she meant to him.

"You can laugh," he said, his eyes darkening with sudden lustful passion. "But I can't have folks—starin' at you. Say, Jess, you don't know, you can't think, how I feel about you. You're jest mine—mine." His teeth clipped together with the force of his emotion. The brute in him urged him as madly in his desire as it did in his harsher tempers. "I just don't care for nothing else but you. An'—I got you now. Here, you haven't kissed me since I came back. I'd forgot, thinking of that sixty thousand of gold-dust. I'm off again in haf-an-hour—an' I won't be back for three days. Here——"

His arms were held out and he drew nearer. But now the woman drew back in unmistakable horror.

"Say," he cried in a voice still passionate, yet half angry, "you don't need to get away. Ther's a wall back of you." Then, as she still shrank back, and he saw the obvious terror in her eyes, his swift-changing mood lost its warmth of passion and left it only angry. "Ther's three other walls an' a door to this room, an' I can easy shut the door."

He reached out and caught her by one arm. He swung her to him as though she were a child. There was no escape. She struggled to free herself, but her strength was as the strength of a babe to his, and in a moment she was caught in his arms and hugged to his breast. She writhed to free herself, but her efforts made no impression. And, having possession of her, the man laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. He looked down at her. Her head was thrown back to avoid him. His hot eyes grinned tantalizingly into her face.

"It's no use," he said. "You got to kiss me. You're mine. No, no, don't you bother to kick any. You can't get away. Now, Jess, kiss me. Kiss me good—good an' plenty." His arms crushed her closer. "What, you won't? You won't kiss me? Ha, ha! Maybe that's why you ran back into the house when I come along. Maybe that's why you wouldn't answer when I called. What's come to you?"

He held her, waiting for a reply. But the woman was beyond speech in her horror and rage. She was no longer terrified. She was beside herself with fury and revolting. She hated the crushing arms about her—the arms of a murderer. That one word stood out in her mind, maddening her. She would not kiss him. She could not. She gasped and struggled. She wanted to shriek for help, but that, she knew, was useless.

"Let me go!" she cried, her voice hoarse with a fury equal to anything he was capable of.

But he only held her the tighter; he only grinned the more. He, too, was furious. He, too, meant to have his way. He was determined she should submit.

Submission, however, was the farthest from her thoughts. He bent his head forward. It came nearer to her up-thrown chin.

"Let me go! Let me go, you—you—murderer!"

It was out. She had no longer any power of restraint. And as the word hissed upon the air the man's whole body seemed to suddenly stiffen. His arms tightened, and she felt her ribs bend under their terrific pressure.

"Murderer, eh?" she heard him cry, with an oath. "Murderer, eh? Now you shall kiss me. Kiss me, you wild-cat—kiss me!"

As he spoke one hand was lifted to the back of her head. He pressed it forward, and she was forced slowly, slowly, fighting every inch of the way to keep her face out of reach of his lips. His face drew nearer hers. She felt his hot breath upon her cheeks. She shut her eyes to keep the sight of his hated, terrifying eyes out, but ever his lips came nearer.

"What's come over you, you little fool?" he cried fiercely. "What is it? Now, by hell! whatever it is, you shall—you shall kiss me."

With a sudden exertion of his great strength he crushed her face to his, and the next instant flung her from him with a fierce cry of pain and rage.

"You ——!" he shouted, as she fell in a heap against the wall.

The blood was streaming from his cheek where her strong teeth had bitten deep into the flesh. His hand went up to the mauled flesh, and murder glared out of his eyes as he contemplated her huddled figure lying motionless where he had flung her. And for one second it looked as though he intended to complete the work he had begun, and kill her where she lay, in the same manner in which he had treated the luckless Conroy.

He stared insanely at her for some moments. Then a change came over him, and he turned to the door.

"When I come back, my girl! When I come back!" he muttered threateningly.

At the door he paused and looked back. But his look was mercifully hidden from his victim by unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE GOLD-STAGE

Two days of excitement were quite sufficient to upset the nerves of Suffering Creek. The only excitement it was used to was the sudden discovery of an extra good find of gold. The camp understood that. It was like an inspiration to the creative worker. It stimulated the energies, it uplifted. Any other sort of excitement had a paralyzing effect. And thus the excitement of the present Sunday and Monday entirely upset the rest of the week's work.

Everybody felt that the happenings of those days were merely the forerunners of something yet to come, of something even more startling. And the restlessness of uncertainty as to its nature kept the population hanging about the camp, fearful that, in their absence, things might occur, and they would miss participation in them.

The inhabitants of Suffering Creek were a virile race, strongly human, full of interest in passing events, and men of appetite for any slices of life that might come their way. So, having "cashed in" to the "limit" all the gold-dust they possessed, they felt they were entitled to spend a few days in watching events, and a few dollars in passing the time until such events, if any, should come within their range of vision.

What events were expected it is doubtful if the most inventive could have put into words. The general opinion expressed—out of Minky's hearing, of course, but to the accompaniment of deep libations of his most execrable whisky—was that, personally, that astute trader was, for some unaccountable reason, rapidly qualifying for the "bug-house," and that the only thing due from them was to display their loyalty to him by humouring him to the extent of discounting all the "dust" they could lay hands on, and wishing him well

out of the trouble he seemed bent on laying up for himself. Meanwhile they would take a holiday on the proceeds of their traffic, and, out of sheer good-fellowship, stand by to help, or at least applaud, when the *dénouement* came.

Many of the shrewder men looked to Wild Bill to give a key to the situation. They knew him to be Minky's closest friend. Besides that, he was a man intensely "wide" and far-seeing in matters pertaining to such a situation as at present existed.

But Wild Bill, in this case, was the blankest of blanks in the lottery of their draw for information. Whether this blankness was real or affected men could not make up their minds. The gambler was so unlike his usual self. The hard, rough, autocratic manner of the man seemed to have undergone a subtle change. He went about full of geniality and a lightness his fellow-citizens had never before observed in him. And, besides, he had suddenly become the only man in the place who seemed to lack interest in the doings of the James gang. Even, beyond the bare facts of the outrage down by the river on Sunday morning, he could not be cajoled into discussing that individual or his doings.

No, his immediate interest apparently lay in his newly purchased half-claim. He spent the Monday afternoon there watching the unwilling Sandy sweating at his labours. And on the Tuesday he even passed him a helping hand. It did not occur to these men that Bill kept away to avoid their cross-questionings. It only seemed to them that his new toy had a greater fascination for him than those things which made for the welfare of the community; that his inexperienced eyes were blinded to the facts which were patent enough to them: namely, that he had bought the most worthless property in the district.

So they laughed, behind his back, and shrugged their great shoulders pityingly, and their pity was also touched with resentment that his interest in Suffering Creek could be so easily diverted. It was Joe Brand who handed them a most excellent laugh on the subject, though the laugh was rather *at* than *with* him.

He was talking to Van and White and several other men at one of the tables in the store. Whisky had brightened his

eyes, which had been quietly smiling for some time as the talk of Bill went round. Then he suddenly bent forward and arrested the general attention.

"Say, boys," he cried, "here's a good one for you. What's the diff'rence between Wild Bill an' Minky?"

Van promptly guffawed.

"Gee!" he cried, "ther' ain't none. They're sure both 'bug.'"

A great laugh greeted the retort, but Joe shook his head.

"That sure ain't the answer, but it's real bright," he admitted reluctantly, while Van preened himself.

"Guess they're both that wise they don't know if they're comin' down or goin' up," he went on, seeking to add to the score he felt he had made.

But Joe felt he was being robbed of the fruits of his effort, and promptly insisted upon his riddle.

"What's the diff'rence between Wild Bill an' Minky?" he asked again, this time with added emphasis.

He waited impatiently until one of the men shook his head, when he snatched at the opportunity of firing his quip.

"Why," he cried, with a shout of delight, "Bill's put his gold into a mudbank, an' Minky's jest yearnin' to set his gold into any old bank," and fell back laughing furiously.

But he had his merriment to himself. Van, feeling he had the company with him, sneered.

"Gee! that's the worst ever," he cried witheringly.

White spat out a chew of tobacco.

"I'd say you're that bright you'd orter write comic Bible trac's," he declared.

But even in his failure as a humorist Joe Brand gave expression to the general opinion of the two men who, up till that time, had been accounted, to use a local expression, the "wisest guys west o' Spawn City."

Certainly, for the time being, the mighty had fallen, and their associates, in the persons of Sunny Oak, Toby Jenks and Sandy Joyce, had to stand by listening to remarks against their fellow Trust members which, though distinctly offensive, they yet, in justice, had to admit were perfectly warranted on the face of things. Even Scipio, mild little man as he was, had to endure considerable chaff, which worried

and annoyed him, as to the way in which he had succeeded in bluffing so shrewd a "guy" as Wild Bill into purchasing half his claim.

But these things were only sidelights on the feelings of the moment. Expectancy was at fever-heat, and each and every man was wondering what was about to happen. For though their belief in Bill and Minky had received a jolt, long months of experience had sown in them an appreciation that took a power of uprooting.

The Monday and Tuesday passed without development of any sort. There were several conferences between the members of the Trust, but these were really only meetings at which the lesser members received more minute instructions for the carrying out of their duties on the Wednesday. No information otherwise was forthcoming for them from either Minky or the president, and all attempt to extort any was promptly nipped in the bud by the latter without the least compunction or courtesy.

Sandy resented this attitude. Sunny complained of the lack of confidence. But Toby sat back immensely enjoying the chagrin of his two friends, and cordially swore that both Minky and Bill knew a large-meshed sieve when they saw one.

Tuesday night was a memorable one on Suffering Creek. Never had there been such a gathering in Minky's store; and his heart must have been rejoiced to see the manner in which so many of the dollars he had expended in the purchase of gold-dust came fluttering back to their nest in his till. The camp appeared to have made up its mind to an orgy of the finest brand. Drink flowed and overflowed. The store that night fairly swam in whisky. The flood set in the moment supper was finished, and from that time until two o'clock in the morning the lusty storekeeper never had a moment's rest.

Men drank themselves drunk, and drank themselves sober again. There was no poker or faro. No one wanted to gamble. There was sufficient gamble in their minds on the subject of to-morrow's stage to satisfy them for the moment. Would it get through? That was the question. And the general opinion was an emphatic denial.

How could it? Had not scouts been sent out inquiring of outlying settlers as to the prospect of a clear road? Had

not information come in that James was abroad, had been seen in a dozen different places in the district? Had not the belief become general that the Spawn City trail was being carefully watched, and even patrolled, by this common enemy? Everybody knew that these things were so. The whole of this stage business was simply flying in the face of Providence.

And amidst all the comment and talk Minky served the requirements of his customers, wrapped in sphinx-like reserve. His geniality never failed him. He had a pleasant word for everybody. And at every gibe, at every warning, he beamed and nodded, but otherwise could not be drawn into controversy. One remark, and one only, had he for all and sundry who chose him as a butt for their pleasantries.

"Wal," he declared easily, "if I ladled out good United States currency, to feed that bum tough James an' his crew o' hawks, seems to me its findin' its way home right smart."

It was quite true. He stood to win in every direction. Sooner or later every cent of money he had paid out in the purchase of gold would find its way back to him, and go to help swell the fortune which was the effort of his life. These men had not the commercial instinct of Minky. And, furthermore, his meeting at night with the gambler, and its resulting compact, was still a secret.

The popular laugh was for the moment against him, but he continued to smile. And he knew that his smile would last the longer. He would still be smiling when even the ghost of their laugh had been laid to rest.

Sore heads were no deterrent next morning. Pillows were deserted at an early hour. And those who had found it convenient to pass the brief remainder of the night in their heavy, clay-soiled boots had the advantage of breakfasting at the first hot rush of Birdie's ministrations. And Birdie, with the understanding of her kind, had bestowed special attention upon the quantity and quality of the coffee, leaving the solid side of the meal almost unconsidered. It was her duty to soothe parching throats, and she knew her duty.

It was a glorious morning. The sun rose radiant in a cloudless sky. The air was still, so still. But the mountain chill began to give way from the first moment that the great

arc of daylight lifted its dazzling crown above the horizon. The quiet of the morning was perfect. It almost seemed as if Nature itself had hushed to an expectant silence. The woe of the night-prowling coyote at the sight of the dawn found no voice. The frogs upon the creek had not yet begun their morning song. Even the camp dogs, whose ceaseless "yap" made hideous all their waking hours, for some subtle reason moved about in quest of their morning meal as though their success depended upon the stealth of their movements.

Blear-eyed men appeared in their doorways half awake, and only just recovering from their overnight orgy. They stood for some moments voiceless and thoughtful. Then the concentration upon the store began. It was strange to look upon. It was an almost simultaneous movement. These half-dazed, wholly sick creatures moved with the precision of a universally impelling force. The store might have been one huge magnet—perhaps it was—and these dejected early risers mere atoms of steel.

But the store reached, that wonderfully revivifying hair of the tail, etc., partaken of, and a rapid change supervened. Quarts of coffee and some trifling solid further stimulated jaded energies, and in less than an hour the memory that the day was Wednesday, and that the gold-stage was to set out upon its eventful journey, became the chief thought in every mind. Curiosity and excitement ran riot, and questions flew from lip to lip. How had Minky provided for the safeguarding of his gold? Had he arranged for an adequate escort? To whom was the gold to be entrusted?

The store was full of men. The veranda overflowed with them. There were men of almost every nationality—from half-breed Mexicans, popularly dubbed "gorl-durned Dagos," to the stolid Briton, the virile New Yorker, the square-headed Teuton, the lithe, graceful prairie man from the Southern States. But the usual noisy discussion of the world's affairs, as viewed from the hidden valley in which lay Suffering Creek, had no vital interest just now. And, after the first rush of burning questions, a hush fell upon the assembly, and it quickly composed itself, in various attitudes and positions of advantage, to await, in what patience it could, the satisfying of its curiosity.

Soon the hush became oppressive. It almost became a

burden. Men stirred uneasily under it; they chafed. And at last Joe Brand found himself voicing something of the feelings of everybody. He spoke in a whisper which, for the life of him, he could not have raised to full voice. He was standing next to White, and he took him confidentially by the shoulder and spoke, leaning over till his lips were on a level with his ear.

"I allow funerals is joyous things an' nigger lynchin's is real comic," he declared hoarsely. "But fer real rollickin' merriment I never see the equal o' this yer gatherin'. I sure don't think it 'ud damp things any ef I was to give 'em a Doxology."

The miner responded with a pensive smile.

"Mebbe you're right 'bout funerals an' nigger lynchin's," he whispered back, "but they's jest a matter o' livin' an' dyin'. Y'see, Minky's gamblin' sixty thousand dollars o' good red gold."

Brand nodded. And somehow he appreciated the point and became easier.

Later on Minky appeared in the store, and almost automatically every eye was turned expectantly upon him. But he had only come to ascertain if Wild Bill was about.

No, the gambler had not been seen. Some one jocularly suggested that he and Zip were out visiting Sandy Joyce upon their claim. None of the three had been seen that morning. But the levity was allowed to pass without a smile, and Minky disappeared again into the back regions of his store.

After that the time passed even more slowly. The store emptied; the men moved out into the sunlight to await the first sight of the stage. There was nothing else to do. Such was their saturation of the previous night that even drink had no attraction at this early hour. So they sat or lounged about, gazing out at the distant upland across the river. There lay the vanishing-point of the Spawn City trail, and beyond that they knew the danger-zone to lie. It was a danger-zone they all understood, and, hardy as they were, they could not understand any one mad enough to risk a fortune of gold within its radius. Not one of them would have faced it singly with so little as twenty dollars in his pocket, much less labouring under the burden of sixty thousand dollars. And yet somebody was going to do so to-day.

A pounding of hoofs and crunching of wheels suddenly swept all apathy away. Every eye lit; every head turned. And in a moment Suffering Creek was on its feet, agog with the intensest interest. For one brief moment the rattle and clatter continued. Then, from round the corner, with bits champing and satin coats gleaming in the sun, their silver-mounted harness sparkling, Wild Bill's treasured team of six horses swept into view. Round they swung, hitched to his well-known spring-cart, and in a second had drawn up with a flourish in front of the veranda.

A gasp of astonishment greeted this unexpected vision. Men stood gaping at the beaming choreman sitting perched up on the driving-seat. It was the first time in his life he had ever been allowed to handle the gambler's equine children, and his joy and pride were written in every furrow of his age-lined features.

The man sat waiting, while the thoroughbreds pawed the ground and reached restively at their bits. But they were like babes to handle, for their manners were perfect. They had been taught by a master-hand whose lessons had been well learned. And the picture they made was one that inspired admiration and envy in every eye and heart of those who now beheld them.

But these were not the only emotions the sight provoked. Blank astonishment and incredulous wonder stirred them, too. Bill's horses! Bill's cart! Where—where was the gambler himself? Was this the stage? Was Bill——?

The talk which had been so long suppressed now broke out afresh. Everybody asked questions, but nobody answered any. They crowded about the cart. They inspected the horses with eyes of admiration and wonder. No man could have withstood the sight of the rope-like veins standing out through their velvet skin. They fondled them, and talked to them as men will talk to horses. And it was only when Minky suddenly appeared in their midst, bearing in his arms an iron-clamped case which he deposited in the body of the cart, that their attention was diverted, and they remembered the purpose in hand.

The gold-chest deposited and made secure, the storekeeper turned to the crowd about him.

"Well, boys," he said, with an amiable smile, "any more

mail? Any you fellers got things you need to send to your sisters—or somebody else's sisters? You best get it ready sharp. We're startin' at eight o'clock. After that you'll sure be too late. Y'see," he added humorously, "we ain't figgered when the next stage goes." He pulled out his nickel silver timepiece. "It's needin' five minutes to schedule," he went on officially, glancing keenly down the trail. Any one sufficiently observant, and had they been quick enough, might have detected a shade of anxiety in his glance. He moved round to the side of the cart and spoke to the man in the driving-seat.

"It's nigh eight. He ain't here?" he said questioningly.

"Guess he'll be right along, boss," the little man returned in a low voice.

Again the storekeeper glanced anxiously down the trail. Then he turned away with a slight sigh.

"Well, boys," he said, with another attempt at jocularity, "if ther' ain't nuthin' doin', guess this mail's sure closed."

Passing again to the back of the cart, he gazed affectionately upon the gold-chest. Then he lifted his eyes just as Van voiced the question in everybody's mind.

"You sure ain't sendin' pore old Danny with that stage?" he cried incredulously. "You sure ain't sendin' him fer James to sift lead through? You ain't lettin' him drive Bill's horses?"

"He sure ain't. Him drive my plugs? Him? Gee! Ther' ain't no one but me drives them hosses—not if Congress passed it a law."

The harsh, familiar voice of Wild Bill grated contemptuously. He had come up from his hut all unnoticed just in time to hear Van's protesting inquiry. Now he stood with eyes only for his horses.

Daylight at last shone through the mist of doubt and puzzlement which had kept the citizens of Suffering Creek in darkness so long. They looked at this lean, harsh figure and understood. Here was the driver of the stage, and, curiously, with this realization their doubts of its welfare lessened. All along they had been blaming Bill for his lack of interest in the affairs of the camp, and now——

They watched him with keen, narrowing eyes. What mad game was he contemplating? They noted his dress. It was

different to that which he usually wore. His legs were encased in sheepskin chaps. He was wearing a belt about his waist from which hung a heavy pair of guns. And under his black, shiny, short coat he was wearing a simple buckskin shirt.

They watched him as he moved round his horses, examining the fit of the bridles and the fastenings of the harness. He looked to the buckles of the reins. He smoothed the satin coats of his children with affectionate hand. Then in a moment they saw him spring into the cart.

Taking the reins from the choreman, he settled himself into the driving-seat, while the deposed charioteer clambered stiffly to the ground.

Minky was at the wheel nearest to his friend. The horses, under the master-hand, had suddenly become restive. Bill bent over, and the storekeeper craned up towards him.

"Ther' was two fellers hit the trail this morning," the gambler said, with a short laugh. "I see 'em when I was with Zip—'fore daylight."

"You—you best quit it," said Minky in serious, anxious tones. "We kin, maybe, hold the gold up against him here. It ain't too late. It ain't, sure."

Bill's face suddenly darkened. All the lightness which the prospect before him had inspired suddenly left it. His words came so full of bitter hatred that the other was startled.

"Not for a million-dollar halo!" he cried, reaching out for his long whip.

With a dexterous swing he set it cracking over his horses' backs. The high-strung beasts plunged at their bits, and the leaders started to rear. Again he swung out his whip, and this time it flicked the plunging leaders. Instantly there was a rush of feet and a scrunch of wheels. The "tugs" pulled taut, and the gush of eager nostrils hissed like steam upon the still air. There was a shout of farewell from the onlookers, and the gambler turned in his seat.

"So long, fellers," he cried. "I'm makin' Spawn City by daylight to-morrer—sure."

The next moment he was lost in a cloud of dust, as the horses raced down the hill.

CHAPTER XXX

ON THE SPAWN CITY TRAIL

WILD BILL'S lean hands clawed the reins with muscles of steel. For the moment his six horses occupied his every thought. They were pulling with the madness of high-bred racehorses. The trail lay before them, their master sat behind. What more could they want, but that liberty to stretch their willing bodies?

Down the hill and along the wood-lined trail that ran parallel to the sluggish creek they raced. The dust rose under their feet, and the wheels of the cart left a fog behind them. It rose in swirling clouds as though to shut off all retreat. Presently the road narrowed to a mere track, and the dark woods closed in. But there was no slackening under the hand of the gambler. Nor had the horses any desire to slacken their headlong rush. The woods broke and gave to a low bush, and in a moment the track opened upon Scipio's claim.

Now, for the first time since the start as they swept across it, Bill permitted his gaze to wander from his charges. He looked away at the mouth of the tunnel Sandy had spent so much labour and such bitter cursing in the process of constructing; and a half-smile flitted across his hard face as he beheld the oozy débris, the idle tools, the winch and buckets. The sight seemed to afford him amusement. There was a softening, too, in his hard face. Maybe it was the result of his amusement. Maybe it was due to some thought of the little man with whom he was partners. But he seemed to freeze up again as the claim passed, and the horses floundered over the heavy trail beside the black, oily swamp beyond. It was bad driving here, and he steadied the racing creatures down with voice and hand.

"Easy, Gipsy. Easy you, Pete. Now, Maisie. So! Steady, boys. Easy!"

The harsh voice was hushed and gentle. He was speaking to creatures that were not merely horses to him, but something nearer, perhaps even dearer.

And the well-trained creatures responded at once, slowing to an easy trot, a pace which they kept until the ford of the creek was reached. Here they dropped to a walk as they splashed their way through the turgid stream. But the moment the wheels of the cart topped the opposite bank, they once more resumed their headlong gait.

At once the gambler sat up. He straightened his lean body as a man who opens his lungs to breathe in deep draughts of fresh, bracing air. His narrow eyes stared out aside of him and beyond. His nostrils expanded, and his thin lips were tightly shut.

The camp was behind him. The trail, a hard, wide sand trail, lay ahead. The wide, wild world was about him on every hand, reminding him of days long gone by, reminding him that to-day his instincts were still the same. The same fiery, militant spirit that had driven him from one end of his country to the other still left him yearning for the ruthless battle of wild places and wilder men. The long months of inactivity, the long days of peace, the longer nights of his gambler's craft, were for the moment gone. He was setting out, as in the old days, surrounded by all in life he cared for, offering a challenge to all the world, ready to grapple with whatsoever the gods of war might choose to thrust in his way.

The man's spirit rose. The swift-flashing eyes brightened. His body felt to be bursting with a ravishing joy of life. His purpose was his own. The joy was his alone. He had found excuse for satisfying his own greedy lust, a lust for battle which no overwhelming odds could diminish. He was a savage. He knew it; he gloried in it. Peace to him was a wearisome burden of which at all times he was ready to rid himself. So he was born. So he had always lived. So, he knew, he would die.

The trail rose with the upland. It rose with that gradation which so wears down the ardour of almost any horse. But

the creatures Wild Bill was driving were made of unusual mettle. Their courage was the courage of the man behind them. And only when his courage failed him would their spirit falter. They swept up the long stretch as though the effort were a pastime. With ears pricked forward, nostrils gushing, their veins standing out like whipcord through their satin coats, they moved as though every stride were an expression of the joy of living. And the man's steel muscles were held at tension to keep their gait within the bounds of reason.

As they neared the hill-top he turned and glanced back over his shoulder. There lay the camp nestling on the far side of the creek. There stood Minky's store, lording it over its lesser fellows with the arrogance of successful commerce. He could see a small patch of figures standing about its veranda, and he knew that many eyes were watching for a final sight of him at the moment when he should vanish over the hill.

They were friendly eyes, too, he knew. They were the eyes of men who wished him well. But he doubted if those good wishes were for his own sake. He knew he was not a man whom men loved. And he smiled grimly as he glanced down at the chest of gold in the body of the cart.

In a moment his eyes were looking out ahead again, and all thought of those he was leaving behind left his mind.

The hill-top passed, the horses swung down into a deep, long valley. It was in this valley, some six or seven miles farther on, he had encountered Scipio in Minky's buckboard He thought of that meeting now, and remembered many things; and as recollection stirred his teeth shut tight till his jaw muscles stood out like walnuts through his lean cheeks. He had promised Scipio that day. Well, his mind was easier than his feelings. He was confident. But he was stirred to a nervous desire to be doing.

Nothing escaped his watchful eyes. Every tree, every bush, every rise and hollow passed under his closest scrutiny. But this was simply his way, a way that had long since been forced into a habit. He did not anticipate any developments yet. The battle-cry was yet to be sounded. He knew the men he was likely to deal with better than any other class.

He knew their ways, their subtleties. Who should know them better? Had not years of his life been spent——?

He laughed aloud, but his laughter rang without mirth. And his horses, taking the sound to be a command, broke suddenly into a gallop. It was the sympathy between man and beast asserting itself. They, too, possessed that nervous desire to be doing. Something of the significance of the journey was theirs, and their nerves were braced with the temper of fine steel.

He steadied them down with the patience of a devoted father for a pack of boisterous children. No harsh words disturbed their sensitive ears. The certainty of their obedience made it unnecessary to exert any display of violence. They promptly fell again into their racing trot, and the cart once more ran smoothly over the hard beaten trail.

The higher reaches of the creek cut into the valley from the right, and the trail deviated to a rise of sandy ground. He had reached the point of his meeting with Scipio. Nor did he slacken his pace over the dust-laden patch. It was passed in a choking cloud, and in a moment the rise was topped and a wild, broken country spread out before him.

Five miles farther on he halted beside a small mountain stream and breathed his horses.

But his halt was of the briefest. He simply let the horses stand in their harness. It was not time to feed, but he removed their bits and let them nip up the bunches of sweet grass about their feet. And as he did so he paused a moment at the head of each animal, muttering words of encouragement, and administering caresses with a hand which bore in its touch an affection that no words of his could have conveyed.

Then he went back to the cart and made a few simple dispositions. One was to securely lash the gold-chest in its place; but its place he changed to the front of the cart. Another was to leave the lid of the foot-box, built against the dashboard, wide open, and to so secure it that it could not close again. Another was to adjust the lowered hood of the cart in a certain way that it was raised head-high as he sat in his driving-seat.

Then, with a grim satisfaction in his small eyes as he

glanced over his simple preparations, he jumped to the ground and replaced the bits in his horses' mouths. In two minutes he was again rushing over the trail, but this time through a world of crag and forest as primitive and rugged as was his own savage soul.

So the journey went on, over mountainous hills, and deep down into valleys as dark as only mountain forests of spruce and pine could make them. Over a broken road that set the light cart perilously bumping, speeding along the edges of precipices, with little more than inches to spare, at a pace that might well set the nerves jangling with every jolt. Later a halt for feed and water, and on again, the willing horses taking their rest only as the difficulties of the trail reduced their pace to a laborious walk.

The man sat alert through it all. There was no question in his mind. He knew what lay ahead of him somewhere in those vast depths. He knew that what he looked for was coming just as surely as the Day of Doom. He did not ask when or where. That was not his way. It might come when it chose, for his part. He was ready and even yearning for the moment of its coming.

So his eyes never rested for a moment. Scarce a glance or thought did he give to his horses. Theirs it was to keep to the trail. Theirs it was to keep their pace. His was all other responsibility.

The sun was leaning towards the western crags, where, in the distance, they raised their snow-crowned heads towards the heavens. The ruddy daylight was deepening to that warmth of colour which belongs to day's old age. The forest shadows appeared to deepen, those dark forests so far below him in the valleys. Here, where he was racing along at a high level, all was bright, the air was joyous. Below him lay the brooding stillness where lurked a hundred unknown dangers. There were only about fifteen more miles of this broken solitude, and beyond that stretched a world of waving, gracious grassland right on to the prairie city whither he was bound.

He stirred; his roving eyes abruptly concentrated. One distant spot on the rugged landscape held him. He craned forward. The movement caused him to ease his hand upon

the reins. Instantly the horses sprang into a gallop. So intent was he that for the moment the change passed unnoticed. He seemed only to have eyes and thought for that distant hill-top. Then of a sudden he realized the breakneck speed, and turned his attention upon his team.

The animals once more reduced to a sober pace, he turned again to the spot which held his interest; and his eyes grew bright with a smile that had nothing pleasant in it. He was grinning with a savage joy more fierce, more threatening, than the cruellest frown. The next time he bestirred himself it was to swing his gun-holsters more handy to the front of his body.

Later on his interest seemed to lessen. No longer was there that watchfulness in his eyes. Perhaps it was he deemed there was no longer the necessity for it. Perhaps what he had seen had satisfied his restless searching. Anyway, he now sat contemplating the shining backs of his horses as they sped down the hill, and his eyes were friendly as he watched the rolls of muscle writhing under their satin coats.

But when next he looked up his moment of gentleness had passed. His easier moods were never of long duration. One swift glance again at the distant hill, and then he turned from it and sat gazing at the dank, oozy prospect of the low-lying flat he was just entering with no sort of friendliness. The sharp hoofs of his team were flinging mud in every direction, and the rattle of the wheels had deadened to a thick sucking as they sank into the black mud. It was a heavy pull, but the speed was not checked. It only needed an extra effort, and this the willing team readily applied. He knew the spot well; and he knew that beyond lay the hill, the crest of which had so held his attention a few minutes before.

His thoughts travelled no farther than that hill. For the time at least there was nothing beyond. Later it would be for him to consider that. Just ahead of him lay the chances and changes which went to make up such a life as his. This he knew. And somehow the thought stimulated his pulses to a fuller appreciation of things.

In a few moments he was nearing the far boundary of the flat, and the ascent of the hill was about to commence. He smiled. Yes, it was well calculated. The hill would have

to be taken at a walk. It was by far the steepest of the journey. He, remembered, too, that the crest of it was reached by a final climb that became almost precipitous. He remembered, too, that the black woods that crowded its sides at the crest gave place to the skeleton trunks left by some long-forgotten forest fire. Yes, it was the one spot on the whole journey best calculated for what was to come.

The team no longer laboured in the ooze. The ascent was begun. With heads held high, with ears pricked and nostrils distended they faced the big effort unflinchingly.

And the driver's mind was calculating many things. It was moving with the swiftness of an able general's in the midst of a big action. He glanced at the sky. Already the sun was hidden behind the western hills. Already the shadows were lengthening and the grey of evening was falling. The profound woods, dense and ghostly, had closed in. The trail was so narrow that the dreary, weeping foliage often swept the sides of the cart. But these things did not occur to him. His mind was ahead, amongst those aged skeletons left by the raging fire-fiend.

Progress was slow. It was almost too slow for the man's eager nerves. He wanted to reach his goal. His lean body thrilled with a profound joy. He lusted for the battle which he knew to lie ahead of him. But, even so, he gave no outward sign. His face was set and harsh. His small eyes bored through the gloom, thrusting to penetrate beyond every bend in the winding road. Nothing escaped them. Each small fur that fled in terror at his approach was carefully noted, for they told him things he wanted to know.

Now the final steep was reached. It was truly precipitous. The sharp hoofs of the team clawed their way up. Such was the struggle that even the man found himself leaning forward, instinctively desiring to help the labouring animals. Each bend in the trail was sudden and at brief intervals. It was as though those responsible for the original clearing of the road had realized the impossibility of a direct ascent, and had chosen the zigzag path as the only means of surmounting the hill.

The moments passed. Bend followed bend. The man in the cart found himself mechanically counting them. Two

more. One more. The summit was almost reached. And beyond? He sighed. Maybe it was the sigh of a man whose nerves are relieved from their tension, knowing that beyond this last bend lay his goal. Maybe it was inspired by sympathy for his struggling horses. Anyway, his whole manner underwent a change. The watchfulness seemed to have gone from his eyes, his muscles to have relaxed. He leant back in his seat like a man full of weariness, and securely fastened his reins to an iron rail on the side of the cart.

He was at the bend now. The leaders were abreast of it. They were past it. He——

There was a sharp rattle of firearms, and half-a-dozen bullets swept pinging their way over his head. A hoarse voice shouted a command to halt. His horses plunged forward. But, quick as lightning, his hands flew to the reins, and he drew them up to a standstill in the open.

"Hands up!" shouted the same voice; and a horseman appeared on each side of the team.

Then came an exhibition of the gambler as he was, as in the old days he had always been known. It was all done in the fraction of a second. Simultaneously his two guns leapt from his holsters and two shots rang out. There was an ominous echo from the woods. One horseman reeled in his saddle, and the horse of the other man stumbled and finally fell.

The next moment the man in the cart was crouching down, all but the crown of his head and his gleaming eyes well sheltered by the loose-hanging canvas hood.

"I'm 'most allus ready to put my hands up!" he snarled. "Come on!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BATTLE

A SHOUT of fury. A wild chorus of meaningless blasphemy. A thundering of hoofs. A shriek of pain—an appalling death-cry. The fight has begun—such a fight, in its wanton savagery, as might shame even the forest beasts. In a moment the human lusting for the blood of its fellows is let loose, than which there is no more terrible madness on earth.

Yet there was a difference. There was a difference of motive widely separating the combatants; and it was a difference that left the balance of offence doubtful.

To analyze the mental attitude of these people adequately would be well-nigh impossible. Their outlook possessed distortions which changed with chameleon-like rapidity. On the one hand was a band of lawless ruffians, steeped to their very souls in every sort of crime, in whose minds all law was anathema, in whose understanding all possession was a deliberate challenge, in whose hearts was no pity, no mercy, no feeling which belongs to the gentler side of human life; to whose comprehension death has no meaning until its relentless grip is fixed, and they feel the last spark of life crushing out of their own bodies. Then—— But the analysis becomes hopelessly chaotic.

On the other hand motive is perhaps even more difficult still, though a shade less hopeless. The gambler was a man of strong thought, of strong forces. Nor was he devoid of the gentler feelings of life. Yet here lies the difficulty of associating the various sides of his character with his actions. He had set out for this encounter. He had yearned for it, as a child might yearn for a plaything. The contemplation of it gave him ecstasy. With an inhuman joy he desired the

lives of these men. Not one, but all; and one even more than all. Then, too, his purpose was in face of overwhelming odds—in face of almost a certainty of death for himself. Such actions have been performed before in noble causes, but here——?

Was it simply his purpose to yield himself a martyr to the public welfare? Was it that he truly desired to avenge a wronged man? Was he setting himself up as the avenger of Sid Morton's cruel death, a man in whom he had no interest whatever? No. It would be absurd to believe that these things were the promptings responsible for his present actions. Some hideous psychological twist was driving him. Some passion swayed him over which he had no control whatever. Some degeneracy was upsetting his mental balance, and forcing him against his better instincts. But, even so, his whole attitude was that of a man of clear, alert mind, of iron purpose, of a courage invincible.

Calm and cold Wild Bill crouched while, in the first rush of battle, the shots hailed about him. He reserved his fire, too, waiting for the effective moment with the patience of a skilful general. His every shot must tell, and tell desperately.

Three times he was hit in as many seconds, but beyond hugging his flimsy shelter more closely he gave no sign. His purpose rose above all physical hurt or sense of pain. He was watching the movements of one man—of one man only. His gleaming eyes pursued the figure of the outlaw leader to the exclusion of all else. James was his quarry. The rest—well, the rest were merely incidental.

And, emboldened by his intended victim's silence, James suddenly changed his tactics. A long-range battle was little enough to his savage taste. He ceased the ineffective fire of his men and brought them together. Then in a moment, with the reckless abandon of his class, he headed them and charged. They came, as before, with a brazen shout, and the air was hideous with a fresh outburst of blasphemy, while a rush of lead searched the fragile cart in every direction.

But the din of voices, the crash of woodwork as the panels of the cart were riddled by the wildly flung shots, was powerless to draw the defender. His guns were ready. He was

ready for the purpose in his mind. That was all. His fierce eyes lit with a murderous intent as he calculated with certainty and exactness.

On they came. They drove their maddened horses with savage spurs right up to the cart. It was the moment the gambler awaited. He leapt, and in a flash his tall figure was confronting the leader of the attack. And as he rose his arms were outstretched and his great guns belched their murderous fire. Two men rolled from their saddles with a death-scream that died down to a hideous gurgle, as the racing hoofs trod the last atom of life out of their bodies. His guns belched a second time, and James' throat was ploughed open, and the rich red blood spurted in a ghastly tide. Another shot and another man fell forward, clutching his horse's mane while he was borne from the battle-field to the dim recesses of the forest by his uncontrolled and affrighted beast.

But the gambler paid a high price for these successes—far higher than he could really afford. Four times more he was badly hit. Four times the hot slither of burning lead ploughed its way amidst the life-channels of his body. And his retreat to cover was something almost in the nature of collapse.

But the spirit of the man admitted of no weakening. It rose dominant over all physical sensation. He thrust aside the cognizance of his hurts, and abandoned himself solely to his purpose. James was still in the saddle, and the sight of his hated personality consumed him with rage and disgust at the failure of his first attempt.

"Still around. Still around," he muttered. And in a moment the battle was surging once more.

No longer was the leader of the attack moved by the irresponsible bravado of his first attack. He was a raging savage, goaded by the desperate wounds he had received, and the knowledge that he and all his force were being held at bay by one man. So he charged again, a headlong rush, howling as he came at the head of his four remaining supporters.

They came like an avalanche, their voices making hideous the rapidly falling night, while the wounded defender waited, waited, all his purpose concentrated, husbanding his ebbing strength as a starving man might husband the last crumbs of food. He knew that not only his strength, but his very life

was slowly ebbing in the red tide that was fast saturating every shred of his clothing.

Again they reached the cart. Again the maddened horses were driven head on to the dreaded fortress. And instantly their quarry rose to his full height, a grim spectre thrilling with a murderous purpose, his arms outstretched, his guns held low, that there should be no mistake this time.

The crash of battle was appalling. The scene was almost lost in the smoke cloud which hung over it. There was fire and cross-fire. There were exultant shouts and cries of pain. And through it all the scuttling of rushing hoofs and champing bits. A moment and the defender dropped. But instantly he rose again, gripping in his nervous hands the butts of a pair of fresh guns snatched from his foot-box. Nor did he stir foot again, nor relax a muscle, till every one of the twelve chambers was emptied.

Then, with an oath that carried with it all the pent-up hatred of a bitter heart, he flung both weapons in the direction whither his last shot had gone, and, staggering back, dropped helplessly into the driving seat behind him.

The smoke hung heavily and drifted slowly away upon the still air. The sound of rushing hoofs receded and died away in the distance, and in a while a profound quiet settled upon the scene. The man lolled heavily in his seat, and his eyes closed. His face was a ghastly grey, his eyes were sunken and his blackened lips hung agape. His arms hung helplessly at his side, and his legs were stretched out in a pitiable attitude of uselessness.

The moments passed drearily. For a long time there was no movement of any sort but the restless fidgeting of the horses. They had stood through all the turmoil as their master had long since trained them to stand. But now that it was over their eager spirits were demanding the joy of the trail again. It almost seemed as though, in their equine minds, they had a full realization of the meaning of that battle in the wild, as though sympathy between master and beast had held them during that fierce ten minutes still and passive, lest through any act of theirs they should cross the will of the one being whom they acknowledged their lord. And now that it was over and the crisis passed, it seemed as

if they understood that victory had been achieved, and their duty once more lay upon the trail ahead of them.

At last the eyes of the man opened. The chafing of his horses had penetrated to his numbing brain. Their fierce depths were dull and lustreless as they rolled vaguely around. Yet there was intelligence in them, although it was the intelligence of a weary, fainting mind. They closed again, as though the will behind them lacked in its support. And then followed a sigh, a deep, long sigh of exhaustion.

There was another pause, and presently there came a bodily movement. The man stirred uneasily, in the manner of one gathering his weakening forces for a supreme effort from which his whole body shrank. Again his eyes opened, and this time their depths were full of purpose. Suddenly his legs gathered under him and his arms drew up, and in a moment he staggered to his feet, his hands clutching support upon the back of the seat.

He stared about him doubtfully, and his uncertainty was pitiful to behold. His eyes were only half open, as though the effort of sustaining their lids was too great for his failing powers. They wandered on over the scene, however, until they suddenly fixed themselves upon a spot where two figures were stretched upon the ground. One was lying upon its side with its knees drawn up as though asleep; the other was stretched upon its back, its arms flung out and its legs lying across the other's body. The dead eyes were staring up at the darkening sky, glazed and motionless.

He stared down upon these figures for some time, and the sight seemed to put fresh strength into him; and at last, when he turned away, a pitiful attempt at triumph shone in his dull eyes, and a ghostly smile flitted about the corners of his sagging lips.

He had seen all he wanted to see. His work was done. James was dead. He knew death when he saw it, and he had seen it shining in those staring eyes. James had passed over the one-way trail, and his had been the hand that had sped him upon his journey.

Now he took a deep breath and stood swaying. Then he glanced with measuring eye at the foot-box at his feet. He changed his support, and, bending slowly, dragged a rawhide

rope from inside it. The next moment he fell back upon the seat. But his work had only begun. For some time he fumbled with the rope, passing it about his body and the iron stanchions of the back of the seat, and after awhile had succeeded in knotting it securely. Then, after a moment of hard breathing, he reached out and untied the reins from the rail of the cart and gathered them into his hands. And as he did so his lips moved and his voice croaked brokenly.

"Come on, Gyp," he mumbled hoarsely. "Come, gal. Hey—you, Pete. You, too—Maisie. Come on. Get on."

It was the word his faithful friends had awaited.

Chilled and eager, they leapt at their bits, and the traces snapped taut. They were off; and in their eager rush the reins were almost torn from the driver's numbing fingers. Again he spoke, and in his halting words was a world of affection and encouragement.

"Easy, children," he said. "Easy, boys an' gals. Ther' sure ain't no hurry now. They're dead—all—dead. Dead as —mutton."

He clawed full possession of the reins again. And in a moment the cart was speeding down the long gradient that was to bear them on the prairie world beyond.

The man was lolling forward, straining on the rope that held his helpless body to the seat, and his eyes closed wearily. The speed of the team, the direction, these things meant nothing to him now. The trail was well marked right in to Spawn City. There were no turnings. That was all that mattered. These children of his would faithfully keep on their way to the end. He knew these things without thinking, and the knowledge left him indifferent. His only concern now was the gold. It was in the cart, and it must reach Spawn City. To that his honour was pledged.

The reins slipped through his fingers. He stirred uneasily. Then his eyes opened again. For a moment his sagging lips closed. He was summoning all his failing strength. He clutched the reins in one hand, and with the other knotted them about his wrist. Then, with a gasp, his left hand dropped from his task, while his right arm was held outstretched by the strain of the pulling horses upon the reins.

There was now no longer any demand for further effort, and the drooping body lolled over against the side of the cart as though the man were seeking his rest. His head hung away at a helpless angle, and his legs straggled. And thus the speeding team raced clear of the mountain world and plunged through the darkness to the prairie beyond.

The moon rose in all its cold splendour. The stars dimmed before its frigid smile. The black vault of the heavens lit with a silvery sheen, embracing the prairie world beneath its bejewelled pall.

The sea of grass lay shadowed in the moonlit dusk. But, in sharp relief, a white ribbon-like trail split it from end to end, like some forlorn creature with white outspread arms yearning in desolation—yearning for the bustle and rush of busy life which it is denied, yearning to be relieved from so desperate a solitude.

The vastness and silence dwarfs even thought. The things which are great, which have significance, which have meaning to the human mind are lost in such a world. Life itself becomes infinitesimal.

There is something moving in a tiny ebullition of dust along the white trail. It looks so small. It moves so slowly, crawling, seemingly, at a snail's pace. It is almost microscopical in the vastness.

Yet it is only these things by comparison. It is neither small, nor is it travelling at a snail's pace. It is a cart drawn by six horses, racing as though pursued by all the demons of the nether world.

And in the driving-seat is a curious, stiffly swaying figure. It is strangely inanimate. Yet it suggests something that no ordinary human figure could suggest. It is in its huddled attitude, its ghastly face, its staring, unseeing eyes, which gaze out in every direction, as the jolting of the cart turns and twists the body from side to side. There is something colossal, something strangely stirring in the suggestion of purpose in the figure. There is something to inspire wonder in the most sluggish mind. It tells a story of some sort of heroism. It tells a story of a master mind triumphing over bodily weakness

and suffering. It tells a story of superlative defiance—the defiance of death.

The early risers of Spawn City were gathered in a stupefied crowd outside the principal hotel in the place. Six jaded horses, drawing a light spring-cart, had just pulled up. The poor creatures were utterly spent, and stood with drooping heads and distended nostrils, gasping and steaming, their weary legs tottering beneath them. Their great eyes were yearning and sunken, and their small ears lay back, indifferent to every sound or movement about them. Their last buoyancy has been expended. They have run their mad race till their hearts are nigh bursting.

But the horses were of the least interest to the onlookers. It was the dusty spring-cart that interested their curious minds—the cart, and the still and silent driver, who made no attempt to leave his seat. They stood gaping, not daring to disturb the ghastly figure, not daring even to approach it too closely. Their minds were thrilling with a morbid horror which held them silent.

But at last there came a diversion. A burly, rough-clad man pushed his way through the crowd, and his keen eyes flashed a quick look over the whole outfit. He was the sheriff, and had been hurriedly summoned.

"Wild Bill!" he muttered. "Them's sure his plugs, too," he added, as though seeking corroboration.

There was certainly doubt in his tone, and surprise, too; and he came to the side of the cart and gazed up into the awful face drooping forward over the outstretched arm to further convince himself. What he beheld caused him to click his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was his only means of giving expression to the wave of horror that swept over him.

With a leap he sprang into the seat, and began releasing the knotted reins from the stiffened arm. So tight had the knots been drawn that it took some moments. Then he turned, and with difficulty removed the rawhide from about the middle of the huddled figure. Then he hailed some of the onlookers.

"Ho, you, Joe! You, too, Lalor, an' Ned! Stand by,

lads, an' bear a hand," he cried authoritatively. "Guess I'll pass it out."

Then he stood up, staring down at the stiffened body; and wonder looked out of his puzzled eyes.

"Gee! if it ain't Wild Bill the gambler, an'—an' he must ha' bin dead nigh six hours."

CHAPTER XXXII

A MAN'S LOVE

It was with strangely mixed feelings that Scipio drove Minky's old mule down the shelving trail leading into the secret valley where stood James' ranch-house. The recollection of his first visit to the place was a sort of nightmare which clung desperately in the back cells of memory. The dreadful incidents leading up to it and surrounding it could never be forgotten. Every detail of his headlong journey in quest of the man who had wronged him, every detail of his terrible discomfiture, would cling in his memory so long as he had life.

But, in spite of memory, in spite of his wrongs, his heart-burnings, the desolation of the past weeks, his heart rose buoyantly as he came within sight of the place in which he still persisted in telling himself that his Jessie was held a prisoner against her will. That was his nature. No optimism was too big for him. No trouble was so great that hope could altogether be crushed out of his heart.

He looked out over the splendid valley extending for miles on either hand of him, and somehow he was glad. Somehow the glorious sunlight, so softened by the shadowed forest which covered the hillsides, so gentle beneath the crowding hills which troughed in the bed of waving grass, sent his simple spirit soaring to heights of anticipatory delight which, a few days back, had seemed beyond his reach.

At that moment, in spite of all that had gone before, the place was very, very beautiful to him, life was wonderful, his very existence was a joy. For was not Jessie waiting for him beyond, in that ranch-house? Was not she waiting for his coming, that she might return with him to their home? Was she not presently to be seated beside him upon the rickety old

seat of Minky's buckboard? And his final thought caused him to glance regretfully down at the frayed cushion, wishing cordially that he could have afforded her greater comfort.

Ah, well, perhaps she would not mind just for this once. And, after all, she would be with him, which was the great thing. Wild Bill had promised him that; and he had every confidence in Wild Bill.

Then he suddenly thought of something he might have done. Surely he might have brought Vada with him. What a pity he didn't think of it before he started out. It was foolish of him, very foolish. But he had been so full of Jessie. The thought of winning her back had quite put everything else out of his head. Yes, it was a pity. The presence of Vada would certainly have added to her happiness, she was so fond of her children.

Then he remembered his instructions. Bill had said he must go alone. He must go alone—and be prepared to fight for her. Bill was a wonderful man. He seemed to be able to do anything he choose. And somehow he felt sorry he had bluffed him into buying half his claim. He could feel the roll of bills, the result of that transaction, in his hip pocket, and the pressure of them impressed itself unpleasantly upon his conscience. He felt sure he had no right to them. He must really give them back to the gambler later. He felt that his attitude was a swindle on a good man. Bill was certainly a good man, a brave man, but he was no business man. He, Scipio, had the advantage of him there.

The buckboard rumbled down to the grassy trail which stretched from the foot of the hillside to the ranch-house. And now the pale-eyed little man bethought him of the fight Bill had promised him.

Quite unperturbed he looked down at the fierce pair of revolvers hanging at his waist. He was taking no chances this time. He had borrowed these guns from Minky, the same as he had borrowed the mule and buckboard. They were fine weapons, too. He had tried them. Oh no, if it came to shooting he would give a different account of himself this time. Mr. James must look to himself. So must Abe Conroy. He would have no mercy. And he frowned darkly down at the gigantic weapons.

Now he considered carefully the buildings ahead. The ranch was certainly a fine place. He found it in his heart to admire it, and only felt pity that it was the house of such a pitiable scoundrel as James. And yet he really felt sorry for James. Perhaps, after all, he ought not to be too hard on the man. Of course, he was a wicked scoundrel, but that might be merely misfortune. And, anyway, Jessie, his Jessie, was a very beautiful woman.

His eyes wandered on to the distant hills, catching up the smaller details of interest as they travelled. There were hundreds of cattle grazing about, and horses, too. Then there were the fenced-in pastures and the branding corrals. James must certainly be an excellent rancher, even if he were a scoundrel.

But the place was very still. Strangely still, he thought. There was not even one of the usual camp dogs to offer him its hostile welcome. He could see none of the "hands" moving about. Perhaps they were——"

Of course. For the moment he had forgotten that they were not simple ranchers. He had forgotten they were man-hunters. They were probably out on the trail pursuing their nefarious calling. And, of course, Bill knew it. That was why he had told him to drive out on this particular morning. Wonderful man, Bill!

Suddenly the distant neighing of a horse startled him, and he looked across at the woods beyond the house, the direction, he calculated, whence the sound came. But there was no horse to be seen. Nothing except the darkling cover of pine woods. It was strange. He was sure the sound came from that direction. No; there was certainly nothing in the shape of a horse out there. There wasn't even a cow. Perhaps it was a "stray" amongst the trees. So he dismissed the matter from his mind and chirruped at the old mule.

And now he came up to the ranch; and the stillness of the place became even more pronounced. It really was astonishing. Surely there must be somebody about. He pushed his guns well to the front, and drew his prairie hat forward so that the brim shaded his pale eyes. He further shifted his reins into his left hand, and sat with his right on the butt of one of his weapons. Whatever was to come he

was ready for it. One thing he had made up his mind to: he would stand no nonsense from anybody—certainly not from James or Conroy.

The old mule plodded on, and, with the instinct of its kind, headed in the direction of the nearest corral. And Scipio was forced to abandon his warlike attitude, and with both hands drag him away into the direction of the house door. But somehow in those last moments he entirely forgot that his mission was a fighting one, and sat shaking the reins and chirruping noisily in the approved manner of any farmer on a visit.

He stared up at the house as he came. His eyes were filled with longing. He forgot the barns, the corrals as possible ambushes. He forgot every thought of offence or defence. There was the abode of his beloved Jessie, and all he wondered was in which part of it lay her prison. He was overflowing with a love so great that there was no room in either brain or body for any other thought or feeling.

But Jessie was nowhere to be seen, and a shadow of disappointment clouded his face as he halted the only too willing beast and clambered down between the spidery wheels. Nor did he wait to secure his faithful servitor, or to think of anything practical at all. He hustled up to the open doorway, and, pushing his head in through it, called till the echoes of the place rang—

"Ho, Jess! Ho, you, Jess! It's me—Zip! I come to fetch you to home."

The echoes died away and the place became still again. And somehow the quiet of it set him bristling. His hands flew to his guns and remained there while he stood listening. But no answer came, and his redundant hope slowly ebbed, leaving a muddy shore of apprehension.

Then, with one glance back over his shoulder, he moved into the building with much the stealth of a thief. In the living-room he stood and stared about him uncertainly. It was the same room he had been in before, and he remembered its every detail. Suddenly he pushed the evil of those recollections aside and called again—

"Ho, Jess! Ho-o-o!"

But the confidence had gone from his tone, and his call suggested an underlying doubt.

Again came the echoes. Again they died. Then—yes—there was a sound that had nothing to do with echoes. Again—yes—sure. It was the sound of some one moving in an upper room. He listened attentively, and again his eyes brightened with ready hope.

"Jess! Jess!" he called.

And this time there was an answer.

Without a moment's hesitation, without a second's thought, he dashed through an open doorway and ran up the narrow flight of stairs beyond.

At last, at last! His Jessie! He had heard her voice. He had heard the music he had longed for, craved for, prayed for. Was there anything in the world that mattered else? Was there anything in the world that could keep him from her now? No, not now. His love permeated his whole being. There was no thought in his mind of what she had done. There was no room in his simple heart for anything but the love he could not help, and would not have helped if he could. There was no obstacle now, be it mountain or stream, that he could not bridge to reach his Jessie. His love was his life, and his life belonged to—Jessie.

He reached the top of the stairs, and a door stood open before him. He did not pause to consider what lay beyond. His instinct guided him. His love led him whither it would, and it led him straight into the presence he desired more than all the world.

For the fraction of a second he became aware of a vision of womanhood, to him the most perfect in all the world. He saw the well-loved face, now pale and drawn with suffering and remorse. He saw the shadowed eyes full of an affrighted, hunted expression. And, with a cry that bore in its depth all the love of a heart as big as his small body, he ran forward to clasp her in his arms.

But Jessie's voice arrested him half-way. It thrilled with hysterical denial, with suffering, regret, horror. And so commanding was it that he had no power to defy its mandate.

"No, no," she shrilled. "Keep back—back. You must not come near me. I am not fit for you to touch."

"Not fit——?"

Scipio stared helplessly at her, his eyes settling uncertainly upon her hands as though he expected to find upon them signs of some work she might have been engaged upon—some work that left her, as she had said, unfit to touch. His comprehension was never quick. His imagination was his weakest point.

Then his eyes came to her well-loved face again, and he shook his head.

"You—you got me beat, Jess. I——"

"Ah, Zip, Zip!" Suddenly Jessie's hands went up to her face and her eyes were hidden. It was the movement of one who fears to witness the hatred, the loathing, the scorn which her own accusing mind assures her she merits. It was the movement of one whose heart was torn by remorse and shame, whose eyes were open to her sins, and who realizes that earthly damnation is her future lot. Her bosom heaved, and dry sobs choked her. And the little man, who had come so far to claim her, stood perplexed and troubled.

At last he struggled out a few words, longing to console, but scarcely understanding how to go about it. All he understood was that she was ill and suffering.

"Say, Jess, you mustn't to cry," he said wistfully. "Ther' ain't nothin' to set you cryin'. Ther' sure ain't——"

But a woman's hysteria was a thing unknown to him, and his gentle attempt was swept aside in a torrent of insensate denial.

"No, no! Don't come near me," she cried in a harsh, strident tone. "Leave me. Leave me to my misery. Don't dare to come here mocking me. Don't dare to accuse me. Who are you to accuse? You are no better than me. You have no right to come here as my judge. You, with your smooth ways, your quiet sneers. Don't you dare! Don't you dare! I'm no longer your wife, so you have no right. I'm his—his. Do you understand? I'm his. I shall live the life I choose, and you shall not molest me. I know you. You've come to accuse me, to tell me all I am, to tax me with my shame. It's cruel—cruel. Oh, God, help me—help me!"

The woman's voice died out in a piteous wail that smote

straight to the heart of the little man who stood shaking before her hysterical outbreak. He knew not what to do. His love prompted him to go to her and crush her to his simple, loving heart, but somehow he found himself unable to do anything but gaze with longing eyes upon the heart-broken figure, as she leant upon the foot-rail of the bed.

He stirred. And in the moments that passed while his eyes were fixed upon her rich, heaving bosom, his mind groping vaguely, he became aware of everything about him. He knew he was in her bedroom. He knew that the furnishings were good. He knew that the sunlight was pouring in through the open window, and that a broad band of dazzling light was shining upon her lustrous dark hair. He knew all these things in the same way that he knew she was suffering so that she came near breaking his own sympathetic heart.

But though his intellect failed him, and he had no idea of what he ought to say or do, words came at last and tumbled headlong from his lips, just as they were inspired, all unconsidered, by his heart.

"Say, Jessie gal," he cried in a softly persuasive tone, "won't you come to home—an'—an' help me out? Won't you, gal?"

But he was given no time to complete his appeal. The woman suddenly raised her face, and once more broke out in hysterical fury.

"Home? Home? With you?" she cried. "Ha, ha! That's too good! Home, with you to for ever remind me what I am? For you to sneer at me, and point me to your friends for what I am? Never, never! Go you back where you came from. I'm not a wife. Do you hear? God help me, I'm——" And she buried her face again upon her arms.

"Won't you come to home, gal?" the man persisted. "Won't you? I'm so desp'rit lonesome. An' the kids, too. Gee! they're jest yearnin' an' yearnin' for you—nigh as bad as me."

He took a step towards her with his arms outstretched. All his soul was in his mild eyes. And presently Jessie raised her head again. She stood staring at the wall opposite her. It was as though she dared not face him. Her eyes were burning, but they were less wild, and a sudden hope thrilled

the man's heart. He hurried on, fearful lest the old storm should break out again—

"Y'see, Jess, ther' ain't nuthin' to our pore little shack on the 'dumps' without you. Ther' sure ain't. Then ther's my claim. I sold haf. An'—an' I got money now—I——"

The woman's eyes turned slowly upon him. They were red with unshed tears. Their expression was curious. There was doubt and shrinking in them. It almost seemed as if she were wondering if all the past days of regret and longing had turned her brain, and she were listening to words conjured by a distorted fancy, some insane delusion. She could not believe. But Scipio continued, and his voice was real enough.

"I—know I ain't much of a feller for the likes of you, Jess," he said earnestly. "I ain't quick. I ain't jest bright. But I do love you, my dear. I love you so I can't think nothin' else. I want you to home, Jess, that bad, I thank God ev'ry day He give you to me. I want you so bad it don't seem you ever bin away from me. I want you that bad I can't remember the last week or so. You'll come—to home, gal—now? Think—jest think o' them bits o' twins. You wait till you see 'em laff when they get eyes on you. Say, they're that bonny an' bright. They're jest like you, wi' their eyes all a-sparklin', an' their cheeks that rosy. Gee! they're jest a-yearnin' an' a-callin' fer their mam—same as me."

The little man had moved another step nearer. His arms were still outstretched, and his quaint face was all aglow with the warmth and love that stirred him. Somewhere in the back of his dull head he knew that he was pleading for something more than his life. He had no subtlety in his manner or his words. It was just his heart talking for him and guiding him.

And in the woman had risen a sudden hope. It was a struggling ray of light in the blackness of her despair. It was a weak struggling flicker—just a flicker. And even as it rose its power was dashed again in the profundity of her suffering. She could not grasp the hand held out—she could not see it. She could not believe the words her ears heard.

"No, no, don't mock at me," she cried, with a sudden return to her old wildness. "It is cruel, cruel! Leave me,

For pity's sake go. How can you stand there taunting me so? How can I go with you? How can I face my children now? Do you know what I am? No, no, of course you don't. You could never understand. You, with your foolish, simple mind. Shall I tell you what I am? Shall I say it? Shall I——"

But the man's hand went up and held her silent.

"You don't need to say nothing, Jess," he said in his mildest tone. "You don't need to, sure. Whatever you are, you're all the world to me—jest all."

With a sudden cry the woman's head dropped upon her outspread arms, and the merciful tears, so long denied her, gushed forth. Her body heaved, and it seemed to the distraught man that her poor heart must be breaking. He did not know what those tears meant to her. He did not know that the victory of his love was very, very near. Only he saw her bowed in passionate distress, and he had no thought of how to comfort her.

He waited, waited. But the flood once broken loose must needs spend itself. Such is the way with women, of whom he had so small an understanding. He turned away to the window. He stared with unseeing eyes at the fair picture of the beautiful valley. The moments passed—long, dreary moments rapidly changing to minutes. And then at last the storm began to die down, and he turned again towards her and drew a step nearer.

"Jess—Jess," he murmured.

Then he took another hesitating step.

But his words seemed to have started her tears afresh, and into his eyes came that painful perplexity again.

Again he ventured, and his step this time brought him close to her side.

"Jess, gal—Jess," he pleaded, with infinite tenderness.

And as the woman continued to sob he stole one arm gently about her waist. She made no move. Only her shaking body calmed, and her tears became more silent.

He strove to draw her towards him, but she clung to the bed-rail with almost child-like persistence, as though she dared not permit herself the hope his encircling arm inspired. But she had not rebuffed him, so with some assertion he thrust

his other arm about her, and, exerting force, deliberately turned her towards him.

"Say, don't you to cry, lass," he whispered softly. "Don't you, now. It jest makes me sore right through. It jest makes me feel all of a choke, an'—an' I want to cry, too. Say, gal, I love you good. I do, Jess—I sure do. Ther' ain't nothin' in the world I wouldn't do to stop them tears. Come to home, gal—come to home."

And as he finished speaking he drew her dark head down to his breast, and laid his thin cheek against her wealth of hair. And, pressing her to the home that was for all time hers, his own eyes filled with tears which slowly rolled down his cheeks and mingled themselves with hers

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE REASON WHY

When Scipio turned his back upon the valley it was with the intention of resting his old mule at the place of the friendly farmer whom he had encountered on his first memorable visit to James' secret abode. From thence, after a night's rest, he would start late next day, and make the creek soon after sundown. For the sake of Jessie he had no desire to make a daylight entry into the camp.

The old mule certainly needed rest. And, besides, it was pleasant to prolong the journey. Moments such as the present were scarce enough in life. And though Jessie was with him for all time now, he greedily hugged to himself these hours alone with her, when there was nothing but the fair blue sky and waving grass, the hills and valleys, to witness his happiness, none of the harshness of life to obtrude upon his perfect joy; nothing, not even the merest duties of daily life, to mar the delicious companionship which his wife's long-desired presence afforded him. The whole journey was to be a sort of honeymoon, a thousand times sweeter for the misery and unhappiness through which they had both passed.

He thought of nothing else. The very existence of James and his gang had passed from his recollection. He had no mind for dangers of any sort. He had no mind for anything or anybody but his Jessie, his beautiful Jessie—his wife.

Had he had the least curiosity or interest in other matters, there were many things, strange things, about the recovery of his wife which might have set him wondering. For instance, he might have speculated as to the desertion of the ranch—the absence of dogs, the absence of all those signs which tell of a busy enterprise—things which could not be

adequately accounted for by the mere absence of the head of it, even though he were accompanied by his fighting men. He might have glanced about among the barns and corrals, or—he might even have questioned his Jessie.

Had he done either of these things a certain amount of enlightenment would undoubtedly have penetrated to his unsuspicious mind. He must inevitably have detected the hand or hands of his earthly guardian angels in the manner in which his path had been cleared of all obstructions.

Had he been less occupied with his own happiness, with the joy of having Jessie once more beside him, and chanced to look back into the valley as he left it for ever, he would certainly have received enlightenment. But he never knew what had been done for him, he never knew the subtle working for his welfare.

Thus it was, all unobserved by him, the moment he was at sufficient distance from the ranch, three horsemen suddenly appeared from amidst the most adjacent point of the forest on the far side of the valley and galloped across to the house. They ran their horses to cover amongst the buildings and dismounted, immediately vanishing into one of the barns.

And as they disappeared a good deal of laughter, a good deal of forceful talk, came from the place which had swallowed them up. Then, after awhile, the three reappeared in the open, and with them came an old choreman, whose joints ached, and whose villainous temper had seriously suffered under the harsh bonds which had held him secure from interference with Scipio for so long.

The men herded him out before them, quite heedless of his bitter vituperation and blasphemy. And when they had driven him forth Sunny Oak pointed out to him the retreating buckboard as it vanished over the far hillside.

"Ther' they go, you miser'ble old son of a moose," he cried, with a laugh. "Ther' they go. An' I guess when James gits around ag'in you'll likely pay a mighty fine reck'nin'. An' I'll sure say I won't be a heap sorry neither. You've give me a power o' trouble comin' along out here. I ain't had no sort o' rest fer hours an' hours, an' I hate folks that sets me busy."

"You're a pizenous varmint, sure," added Sandy, feeling

that Sunny must not be allowed all the talk. "An' your langwidge is that bad I'll need to git around a Bible-class ag'in to disinfect my ears."

"You sure will," agreed Toby, with one of his fatuous grins. "I never see any feller who needed disinfectin' more." Then he turned upon the evil-faced choreman and added his morsel of admonition. "Say, old man, as you hope to git buried yourself when James gits around ag'in, I guess you best go an' dig that miser'ble cur o' yours under, 'fore he gits pollutin' the air o' this yer valley, same as you are at the moment. He's cost me a goodish scrap, but I don't grudge it him noways. Scrappin's an elegant pastime, sure—when you come out right end of it."

After that, cowed but furious, the old man was allowed to depart, and the three guardians of Scipio's person deliberately returned to their charge. Their instructions were quite clear, even though they only partially understood the conditions making their work necessary. Scipio must be safeguarded. They were to form an invisible escort, clearing his road for him and making his journey safe. So they swung into the saddle and rode hot-foot on the trail of their unconscious charge.

For the most part they rode silently. Already the journey had been long and tiresomely uneventful, and Sunny Oak particularly revelled in an impotent peevishness which held him intensely sulky. The widower, too, was feeling anything but amiable. What with his recent futile work on a claim which was the ridicule of the camp, and now the discomfort of a dreary journey, his feelings towards Wild Bill were none too cordial. Perhaps Toby was the most cheerful of the three. The matters of the Trust had been a pleasant break in the daily routine of dispossessing himself of remittances from his friends in the East. And the unusual effort made him feel good.

They had reached the crown of the hill bordering the valley, where the trail debouched upon the prairie beyond, and the effort of easing his horse, as the struggling beast clawed its way up the shelving slope, at last set loose the tide of the loafer's ill-temper. He suddenly turned upon his companions, his angry face dirty and sweating.

"Say," he cried, "of all the blamed fules I'd say we three was the craziest ever pupped."

Sandy turned inquiring, contemptuous eyes in his direction. He always adopted a defensive attitude when Sunny opened out. Toby only grinned and waited for what was to come.

"Meanin'?" inquired Sandy in his coldest manner.

"Meanin'? Gee! it don't need a mule's intellec' to get my meanin'," said the loafer witheringly. "Wot, in the name o' glory, would I mean but this doggone ride we're takin'? Say, here's us three muttons chasin' glory on the tail o' two soppy lambs that ain't got savvee enough between 'em to guess the north end of a hoss when he's goin' south. An', wot's more, we're doin' it like a lot o' cluckin' hens chasin' a brood o' fule chicks. I tell you it jest makes me sick. An' ef I don't git six weeks' rest straight on end after this is thro' I'll be gettin' plumb 'bug,' or—or the colic, or suthin' ornery bum. I've done. Sufferin' Creek ain't no place fer a peace-lovin' feller like me, whose doin' all he knows to git thro' life easy an' without breakin' up a natterally delicate constitootion. I'm done. I quit."

Sandy's face was a study in sneers. Not because he did not agree with the sentiments, but Sunny always irritated him. But Toby only grinned the harder, and for once, while the widower was preparing an adequate retort, contrived to forestall him.

"Seems to me, Sunny, you ain't got a heap o' kick comin' to you," he said in his slow way. "I allow you come in this racket because you notioned it. Mebbe you'll say why you did it, else?"

This unexpected challenge from Toby had the effect of diverting the widower's thoughts. He left the consideration of the snub he had been preparing for the loafer for some future time, and waited for the other's reply. But Sunny was roused, and stared angrily round upon the grinning face of his questioner.

"Guess that ain't no affair of yours, anyway," he snorted. "I don't stand fer questions from no remittance guy. Gee! things is gittin' pretty low-down when it comes to that."

"Maybe a remittance man ain't a first-class callin'," said

Toby, his grin replaced by a hot flush. "But if it comes to that I'd say a lazy loafin' bum ain't a heap o' credit noways neither. Howsum, them things don't alter matters any. An' I, fer one, is sick o' your grouse—'cos that's all it is. Say, you're settin' ther' on top o' that hoss like a badly sculptured image that needs a week's bathin', an' talkin' like the no-account fule most fellers guess you to be. Wal, show us you ain't none o' them things, show us you got some sort of a man inside your hide, an' tell us straight why you're out on this doggone trail when you're yearnin' fer your blankets."

The attack was so unexpected that for once Sunny had no reply ready. And Sandy positively beamed upon the challenger. And so they rode on for a few moments. Then Toby broke the silence impatiently.

"Wal?" he inquired, his face wreathed in a grin that had none of the amiability usual to it.

Sunny turned; and it was evident all his good-nature was restored. He had suddenly realized that to be baited by the fatuous Toby was almost refreshing, and he spoke without any sort of animosity. It would certainly have been different had the challenge come from the hectoring widower.

"Why for do I do it—an' hate it? Say, that's jest one o' them things a feller can't tell. Y'see, a feller grouses thro' life, a-worritin' hisself 'cos things don't seem right by his way o' thinkin'. That's natteral. He guesses he wants to do things one way, then sudden-like, fer no reason he ken see, he gits doin' 'em another. That's natteral, too. Y'see, ther's two things, it seems to me, makes a feller act. One's his fool head, an' the other—well, I don't rightly know what the other is, 'cep' it's his stummick. Anyways, that's how it is. My head makes me want to go one way, an' my feet gits me goin' another. So it is with this lay-out. An' I guess, ef you was sure to git to rock-bottom o' things, I'd say we're all doin' this thing 'cos Wild Bill said so."

He finished up with a chuckle that thoroughly upset the equilibrium of the widower, and set him jumping at the chance of retort.

"Guess you're scairt to death o' Wild Bill," he sneered.

"Wal," drawled Sunny easily, "I guess he's a feller wuth bein' scairt of—which is more than you are."

Sandy snorted defiantly. But a further wordy war was averted by the remittance man.

"Ther's more of a man to you than I allowed, Sunny," he said sincerely. "There sure is. Bill's a man, whatever else he is. He's sure the best man I've see on Sufferin' Creek. But you're wrong 'bout him bein' the reason of us worritin' ourselves sick on this yer trail. It ain't your head which needs re-decoratin', neither. Nor it ain't your stummick, which, I allow, ain't the most wholesome part of you. Neither it ain't your splay feet. You missed it, Sunny, an' I allus tho't you was a right smart guy. The reason you're on this doggone trail chasin' glory wot don't never git around, is worryin' along in a buckboard ahead of us, behind ole Minky's mule, an' he's hoofin' to home at an express slug's gait. That's the reason you're on the trail, an' nothin' else. You're jest a lazy, loafin', dirty bum as 'ud make mud out of a fifty-gallon bath o' boilin' soapsuds if you was set in it, but you was mighty sore seein' pore Zip kicked to death by his rotten luck. An' feelin' that aways you kind o' fergot to be tired. That's why you're on this doggone trail. 'Cos your fool heart ain't as dirty as your carkis."

And as he fired his last word Toby dashed his spurs into the flanks of his jaded horse, and galloped out of reach of the tide of vituperation he knew full well to be flowing in his wake.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LUCK OF SCIPIO

SUFFERING CREEK was again in a state of ferment. It seemed as if there were nothing but one excitement after another in the place now. No sooner was the matter of the gold-stage passed than a fresh disturbance was upon them. And again the established industry of the place was completely at a standstill. Human nature could no more withstand the infection that was ravaging the camp than keep cool under a political argument. The thing that had happened now was tremendous.

Staid miners, old experienced hands whose lives were wedded to their quest of gold, whose interest in affairs was only taken from a standpoint of their benefit, or otherwise, to the gold interest, were caught in the feverish tide, and sent hurtling along with the rushing flood. Men whose pulses usually only received quickening from the news of a fresh gold discovery now found themselves gaping with the wonder of it all, and asking themselves how it was this thing had happened, and if, indeed, it had happened, or were they dreaming.

The whole thing was monstrous, stupendous, and here, happening in their midst, practically all Suffering Creek were out of it. But in spite of this the fever of excitement raged, and no one was wholly impervious to it. Opinions ran riot—opinions hastily conceived and expressed without consideration, which is the way of people whose nerves have been suddenly strung tight by a matter of absorbing interest. Men who knew nothing of the nature of things which could produce so astonishing a result found themselves dissecting causes and possibilities which did not exist, and never could exist.

They hastily proceeded to lay down their own law upon the subject with hot emphasis. They felt it necessary to do this to disguise their lack of knowledge and restore their personal standing. For the latter, they felt, had been sorely shaken by this sudden triumph of those whom they had so lately ridiculed.

And what was this wonderful thing that had happened? What was it that had set these hardened men crazy with excitement? It had come so suddenly, so mysteriously. It had come during the hours of darkness, when weary men hugged their blankets, and dreamed their dreams of the craft which made up their whole world.

There was no noise, no epoch-making upheaval, no blatant trumpetings to herald its coming. And the discovery was made by a single man on his way to his work just after the great golden sun had risen.

He was trailing his way along the creek bank over the road which led eventually to Spawn City. He was slouching along the wood-lined track at that swinging, laborious gait of a heavy-booted man. And his way lay across the oozy claim of Scipio.

But he never reached the claim. Long before he came in view of it he found himself confronted with a sluggish stream progressing slowly along the beaten sand of the trail. For a moment he believed that the creek had, for some freakish reason, suddenly overflowed its banks. But this thought was swiftly swept aside, and he stood snuffing the air like some warhorse, and gaping at the stream as it lapped about his feet.

It came on slowly but irresistibly. And ahead of him, and amongst the trailside bush, he beheld nothing but this rising flood. Then of a sudden something of its meaning penetrated his dazed comprehension, and, turning abruptly, he started to run for the higher ground. He sped swiftly through the surrounding bush, dodging tree-trunks, and threading his way circuitously in the direction where stood the great cut bank of quartz which backed Scipio's claim. The smell of the air had told him its tale, and he knew that he had made a wonderful, an astounding, discovery. And with this knowledge had come the thought of his own possible advantage.

But his hopes were completely dashed the moment he reached the bank overlooking Scipio's claim. There lay the source of the flood, right in the heart of the little man's despised land. A great gusher of coal-oil was belching from the mouth of the shaft which Sandy Joyce had been at work upon, and the whole clearing, right from the oozy swamp beyond to the higher ground of the river bank, stealing its way along trail and through bush, lay a vast shallow lake of raw coal-oil.

The disappointed man waited just sufficiently long to realize the magnitude of Scipio's luck, and then set off at a run for the camp.

And in half-an-hour the camp was in a raging fever. In half-an-hour nearly the whole of Suffering Creek had set out for the claim, that they might see for themselves this wonderful thing that had happened. In half-an-hour the whole thing was being explained in theory by everybody to everybody else. In half-an-hour everybody was inquiring for Scipio, and each and all were desirous of being first to convey the news.

And when it was discovered that Scipio was from home, and knew nothing of his good fortune, a fresh thought came to every mind. What had become of him? They learned that he had borrowed Minky's buckboard, and had driven away. And immediately in the public mind crept an unexpressed question. Had Zip abandoned the place in the face of his ill-luck, and, if so, what about this gigantic oil find?

However, there was nothing to be done at present but wait. The flow of oil could not be checked, and the tremendous waste must go on. The gusher would flow on until the pressure below lessened, and after that it would die down, and require pumps to further exhaust it.

So the camp resigned itself to a contemplation of this wonderful new industry that had sprung up unsought in their midst; and the luck of Scipio was upon everybody's lips. Nor was there only the wonder of it in every mind, for, after the first feelings of envy and covetousness had passed away, the humour of the thing became apparent. And it was Joe Brand, in the course of discussing the matter with Minky, who first drew attention to it.

"Say, don't it lick creation?" he cried. "Can you beat it? No, sirree. It's the best ever—it sure is. Say, here's the worstest mule-head ever got foothold on this yer continent sets out to chase gold in a place no one outside a bug-house would ever find time to git busy, an' may I be skinned alive an' my bones grilled fer a cannibal's supper if he don't find sech a fortune in ile as 'ud set all the whole blamed world's ile market hatin' itself. Gee!"

And Minky nodded his head. He also smiled slyly upon those who stood about him.

"Ther' sure is elegant humour to most things in this yer life," he said dryly. "Which 'minds me Wild Bill bo't haf o' that claim o' Zip's 'fore he set out fer Spawn City."

And at his words somehow a curious thoughtfulness fell upon his hearers. Nor was there any responsive smile among them. The humour he spoke of seemed to have passed them by, leaving them quite untouched by its point. And presently they drifted away, joining other groups, where the reminder that Bill had been derided by the whole camp for his absurd purchase had an equally damping effect.

But the day was to be more eventful even than the promise of the morning had suggested. And the second surprise came about noon.

Excitement was still raging. Half the camp was down at Zip's claim watching the miracle of the oil gusher, and the other half was either on their way thither or returning from it. Some of them were gathering the raw oil in cans and tubs, others were hurrying to do so. And none of them quite knew why they were doing it, or what, if any, the use they could put the stuff to. They were probably inspired by the fact that there was the stuff going to waste by the hundreds of gallons, and they felt it incumbent upon them to save what they could. Anyway, it was difficult to tear themselves away from the fascinations of Nature's prodigal outburst, and so, as being the easiest and most pleasurable course, they abandoned themselves to it.

So it was that Minky found his store deserted. He lounged idly out on to the veranda and propped himself against one of the posts. And, standing there, his thoughtful eyes roamed,

subtly attracted to the spot where Zip's luck had demonstrated itself.

He stood there for some time watching the hurrying figures of the miners as they moved to and fro, but his mind was far away. Somehow Zip's luck, in spite of the excessive figures which extravagant minds had estimated it at, only took second place with him. He was thinking of the man who had journeyed to Spawn City. He was worrying about him, his one and only friend.

He had understood something of that self-imposed task which the gambler had undertaken, though its full significance had never quite been his. Now he felt that in some way he was responsible. Now he felt that the journey should never have been taken. He felt that he should have refused to ship his gold. And yet he knew full well that his refusal would have been quite useless. Wild Bill was a man whom opposition only drove the harder, and he would have contrived a means of carrying out his purpose, no matter what barred his way.

However, even with this assurance he still felt uncomfortably regretful. His responsibility was no less, and for the life of him he could not rise to enthusiasm over this luck of Scipio's. It would have been different if Bill had been there to discuss the matter with him.

And as the moments passed his spirits fell lower and lower, until at last a great depression weighed him down.

It was in the midst of this depression, when, for the hundredth time, he had wished that his friend had never started out on his wild enterprise, that he suddenly found himself staring out across the river at the Spawn City trail. He stared for some moments, scarcely comprehending that at which he looked. Then suddenly he became aware of a horseman racing down the slope towards the river, and in a moment mind and body were alert, and he stood waiting.

Minky was still standing on his veranda. But he was no longer leaning against the post; he was holding a letter in his hand which he had just finished reading. It was a painful-looking document for all its neat, clear writing. It was stained with patches of dark red that were almost brown,

and the envelope he held in his other hand was almost unrecognizable for the same hideous stain that completely covered it.

The man who had delivered it was resting on the edge of the veranda. He had told his story; and now he sat chewing, and watching his weary horse tethered at the hitching-post a few yards away.

"An' he drove that cart fer six hours—dead?" Minky asked, without removing his eyes from the blood-stained letter.

"That's sure how I sed," returned the messenger, and went stolidly on with his chewing. The other breathed deeply.

Then he read the letter over again. He read it slowly, so as to miss no word or meaning it might contain. And, curiously, as he read a feeling of wonder filled him at the excellence of the writing and composition. He did not seem to remember having seen Bill's writing before. And here the rough, hard-living gambler was displaying himself a man of considerable education. It was curious. All the years of their friendship had passed without him discovering that his gambling friend was anything but an illiterate ruffian of the West, with nothing but a great courage, a powerful personality and a moderately honest heart to recommend him.

"My dear Minky,

"I'm dead—dead as mutton. Whether I'm cooked mutton, or raw, I can't just say. Anyway, I'm dead—or you wouldn't get this letter.

"Now this letter is not to express regrets, or to sentimentalize. You'll agree that's not my way. Death doesn't worry me any. No, this letter is just a 'last will and testament,' as the lawyers have it. And I'm sending it to you because I know you'll see things fixed right for me. You see, I put everything into your hands for two reasons: you're honest, and you're my friend. Now, seeing you're rich and prosperous I leave you nothing out of my wad. But I'd like to hand you a present of my team—if they're still alive—team and harness and cart. And you'll know, seeing I always had a notion the sun, moon and stars rose and set in my horses,

the spirit in which I give them to you, and the regard I had for our friendship. Be good to them, old friend.

"For the rest, my dollars, and anything else I've got, I'd like Zip's kids to have. They're bright kids, and I've got a notion for them. And, seeing Zip's their father, maybe dollars will be useful to them. You can divide things equally between them.

"And in conclusion you can tell Zip if he can do a good turn, which I don't suppose he'll be able to, to either Sunny Oak, or Sandy Joyce, or Toby Jenks, he'd best do it. Because he owes them something he'll probably never hear about.

"This is the last will and testament, as the lawyers say, of

"Your old friend,

"WILD BILL.

"(A no-account gambler, late of Abilene.)"

Minky looked up from the letter again, and his eyes were shadowed. He felt that that letter contained more of the gambler's heart than he would ever have allowed himself to display in life.

And into his mind came many memories—memories that stirred him deeply. He was thinking of the days when he had first encountered Bill years ago, when the name of Wild Bill was a terror throughout Texas and the neighbouring States. And he smiled as he remembered how a perturbed Government had been forced, for their own peace of mind, and for the sake of the peace of the country, to put this "terror" on the side of law and order, and make him a sheriff of the county. And then, too, he remembered the trouble Bill was always getting into through mixing up his private feuds with his public duties. Still, he was a great sheriff, and never was such order kept in the county.

He turned again to the man at his side.

"An' he got thro' with the gold?" he inquired slowly.

"Jest as I sed," retorted the weary messenger. "Guess I helped sheriff to deposit it in the bank."

"And he's dead?"

The man stirred impatiently and spat.

"Dead—as mutton."

Minky sighed.

"An' you come along the Spawn City trail?" he asked presently.

"I ain't got wings."

"An' you saw——?"

"The birds flappin' around—nigh chokin' with human meat."

The man laughed cynically.

"Did you recognize——?"

"I see James. He was dead—as mutton, too—an' all his gang. Gee! It must 'a' bin a hell of a scrap."

The man spat out a stream of tobacco juice and rubbed his hands.

"It sure must," agreed Minky. And he passed into the store.

It was dark when Scipio urged the old mule up the bank at the ford of the creek. He was very weary, and Jessie was asleep beside him, with her head pillowed upon his shoulder. His arm was about her, supporting her, and he sat rigid, lest the bumping of the rattling vehicle should waken her. The position for him was trying, but he never wavered. Cramped and weary as he was, he strove by every means in his power to leave her undisturbed.

And as he passed the river three ghostly figures ambled down to the bank, and, after drinking their horses, likewise passed over. But while Scipio kept to the trail, they vanished amidst the woods. Their task was over, and they sought the shortest route to their homes.

And so Scipio came to his claim. And such was his state of mind, so was he taken up with the happiness which the presence of his wife beside him gave him, and such was his delight looking forward to the days to come, that he saw nothing of that which lay about him.

The air to him was sweet with all the perfumes his thankful heart inspired in his thoughts. His road was a path of roses. The reek of oil was beyond his simple ken. Nor did he heed the slush, slush of his mule's feet, as the old beast floundered through the lake of oil spread out on all sides about him. The gurgling, the sadly bubbling gusher, even,

might have been one of the fairy sounds of night, for all thought he gave to it.

No; blind to all things practical as he always was, how was it possible that Scipio, leaving Suffering Creek a poor, struggling prospector, should realize by these outward signs that he had returned to it, possibly, a millionaire?

CHAPTER XXXV

HOME

SCIPIO stood in the doorway of his hut with a hopelessly dazed look in his pale eyes and a perplexed frown upon his brow. He had just returned from Minky's store, whither he had been to fetch his twins home. He had brought them with him, leading them, one in each hand. And at sight of their mother they had torn themselves free from their father's detaining hands and rushed at her.

Jessie, strangely subdued, but with a wonderful light of happiness in her eyes, was in the midst of "turning out" the bedroom. She had spent the whole morning cleaning and garnishing with a vigour, with a heartwhole enjoyment, such as never in all her married life had she displayed before. And now, as the children rushed at her, their piping voices shrieking their joyous greeting, she hugged them to her bosom as though she would squeeze their precious lives out of them. She laughed and cried at the same time in a way that only women in the throes of unspeakable joy can. Her words, too, were incoherent, as incoherent as the babble of the children themselves. It was a sight of mother-love rarely to be witnessed, a sight which, under normal conditions, must have filled the simple heart of Scipio with a joy and happiness quite beyond words.

But just now it left him untouched, and as he silently looked on he passed one hand helplessly across his forehead. He pushed his hat back so that his stubby fingers could rake amongst his yellow hair. And Jessie, suddenly looking up from the two heads nestling so close against her bosom, realized the trouble in her husband's face. Her realization came with a swiftness that would have been impossible in those old days of discontent.

"Why, Zip," she cried, starting to her feet and coming

quickly towards him, "what—what's the matter? What's wrong?"

But the little man only shook his head dazedly, and his eyes wandered from her face to the two silently staring children, and then to the table so carefully laid for the midday meal.

"Here, sit down," Jessie hurried on, darting towards a chair and setting it for him beside the stove. "You're sick, sure," she declared, peering into his pale face, as he silently, almost helplessly, obeyed her. "It's the sun," she went on. "That's what it is—driving in the sun all yesterday. It's—it's been too much for you."

Again the man passed a hand across his brow. But this time he shook his head.

"'Tain't the sun, Jess," he said vaguely. "It's—it's oil!"

For a moment the woman stared. Then she turned to the gaping twins, and hustled them out of the room to play. Poor Zip's head had suddenly gone wrong, she believed, and——

But as she came back from the door she found that he had risen from the chair in which she had set him, and was standing looking at her, and through her, and beyond her, as though she were not there at all. And in an instant she was at his side, with an arm thrown protectingly about his shoulders.

"Tell me, Zip—oh, tell me, dear, what's wrong? Surely—surely, after all that has gone—— Oh, tell me! Don't keep me in suspense. Is—is it James?" she finished up in a terrified whisper.

The mention of that detested name had instant effect. Scipio's face cleared, and the dazed look of his eyes vanished as if by magic. He shook his head.

"James is dead," he said simply. And Jessie breathed a sigh of such relief that even he observed it, and it gladdened him. "Yes," he went on, "James is sure dead. Wild Bill done him up and his whole gang. But Bill's gone, too."

"Bill, too?" Jessie murmured.

Scipio nodded; and perplexity stole over his face again.

"Yes. I—I don't seem to understand. Y'see, he done James up, an'—an' James done him up—sort o' mutual. Y'see, they told me the rights of it, but—but ther's so many

things I—I don't seem to got room for them all in my head. It seems, too, that Bill had quite a piece of money. An' he's kind of given it to the kids. I—I don't——"

"How much?" demanded the practical feminine.

"Seventy thousand dollars," replied the bewildered man.

"Seventy thou—— Who told you?"

"Why—Minky. Said he'd got it all. But—but that ain't the worst."

"Worst?"

Jessie was smiling now—smiling with that motherly, protecting confidence so wonderfully womanly.

Scipio nodded; and his eyes sought hers for encouragement.

"Ther's the oil, millions an' millions of it—gallons, I mean."

"Oil? Millions of gallons? Oh, Zip, do—do be sensible."

Jessie stood before him, and his worried look seemed to have found a reflection upon her handsome face.

"It isn't me. It ain't my fault. It sure ain't, Jess," he declared wistfully. "I've see it. It's there. My pore claim's jest drowned with it. I'll never find that gold now—not if I was to pump a year. It's just bubbling up an' up out o' the bowels of the earth, an'—an' Minky says I'll have to set up pumps an' things, an' he's goin' to help me. So is Sunny Oak, an' Toby, an' Sandy, an' he sez we'll find the gold sure if we pump the oil. Sez it's there, an' I'll be rich as Rockefeller an' all them millionaires. But I can't seem to see it, if the gold's drownded in that messy, smelly oil. Maybe you ken see. You're quicker'n me. You——"

But Jessie never let him finish.

"Oil?" she cried, her eyes swimming with tears of joy and gentle affection for the simple soul so incapable of grasping anything but his own single purpose. "Oil?" she cried. "Oh, Zip, don't you understand? Don't you see? It's oil—coal-oil. You've been searching for gold and found oil. And there's millions of dollars in coal-oil."

But the little man's face dropped.

"Seems a pity," he said dispiritedly. "I could 'a' swore ther' was gold there—I sure could. I'd have found it, too—if the oil hadn't washed us out. Bill thought so, too; an' Bill

was right smart. Guess we'll find it, though, after we pumped the oil."

Suddenly the woman reached out both arms and laid her hands upon his diminutive shoulders. Her eyes had grown very tender.

"Zip," she cried gently, "Zip, I think God has been very good to me. He's been kinder to me than He has been to you. You deserve His goodness; I don't. And yet He's given me a man with a heart of—of gold. He's given me a man whose love I have trampled under-foot and flung away. He's given me a man who, by his own simple honesty, his goodness, has shown me the road to perfect happiness. He's given me all this in return for a sin that can never be wiped out——"

But suddenly Scipio freed himself from the gentle grasp of her restraining hands, and caught her in his arms.

"Don't you—don't you to say it, Jess," he cried, all his great love shining in his eyes. His perplexity and regret were all gone now, and only had he thought of his love. "Don't you to say nuthin' against yourself. You're my wife—my Jessie. An' as long as I've got life I don't want nothin' else—but my Jessie. Say, gal, I do love you."

"And—and—oh, if you can only believe me, Zip, I love you."

The man reached up and drew the woman's face down to his, and kissed her on the lips.

"It don't matter 'bout not finding that gold now," he cried, and kissed her again.

"No, it——"

"Say, momma, ain't it dinner yet?"

"Ess, me want din-din."

The man and woman sprang guiltily apart before the wondering eyes of their children, and the next moment both of the small creatures were caught up and hugged in loving arms.

"Why, sure, kiddies," cried Scipio, his face wreathed in happy smiles. "Momma's got dinner all fixed—so come right along."